

Scottish Poetry Library

AUNT JULIA by Norman MacCaig

Resource by Jane Cooper

Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. Do you have an older relative, or family friend, who you are, or were, especially fond of?
2. What special memories do you have of this person?

Meeting The Text

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

1. Who is the person that MacCaig was especially fond of?
2. What special memories does he have of her?
3. What was the biggest problem that affected his relationship with her?

Aunt Julia

*Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.
I could not answer her -
I could not understand her.*

She wore men's boots 5
when she wore any.
-I can see her strong foot,
stained with peat,
paddling with the treadle of the spinningwheel
while her right hand drew yarn 10
marvellously out of the air.

Hers was the only house
where I've lain at night
in the absolute darkness
of a box bed, listening to 15
crickets being friendly.

She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.
She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends. 20
She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of threepenny bits
in a teapot.

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast. 25
By the time I had learned
a little, she lay
silenced in the absolute black
of a sandy grave
at Luskentyre. 30

But I hear her still, welcoming me
with a seagull's voice
across a hundred yards
of peatscapes and lazybeds
and getting angry, getting angry 35
with so many questions
unanswered.

Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially at how MacCaig conveys a picture of his aunt and of the relationship he had with her. We'll see his admiration and some frustration too. 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.

Some context for this poem

Before you get to work on this poem, you may find it useful to know a little about MacCaig's background. He was born in Edinburgh in 1910 and lived and worked in that city for most of his life, dying in 1996. MacCaig spoke, wrote, and worked in English, but three of his four grandparents were native Gaelic speakers. His mother was from Scalpay, a small Gaelic-speaking island off the coast of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. A number of MacCaig's poems reflect his connection to the north and west of Scotland, and to its lochs, sea and islands.

To fully understand Aunt Julia's life on Scalpay, it's useful to know a little about the traditionally Scottish type of farming called crofting. Crofts are small farms, found in the Scottish highlands and islands; the people who live and work on them are crofters. These crofters might keep a few animals such as sheep, cows or hens, and grow some crops or vegetables. They may also have the right to cut peat from the ground to burn on their fires. Crofts tend to be very small, and not economically productive, so most crofters also need some other means of earning money.

The Title

The title is simple, clear, and direct. We know two things right away: the name of the main character, and the fact that MacCaig was related to her. This establishes an immediate connection between the writer and his subject. The poem is about a relationship.

Stanza One

The first stanza:

*“Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.
I could not answer her -
I could not understand her.”*

is, like the title, very clear and direct. We are left in no doubt about what MacCaig is trying to tell us.

Q 1 Why is this clarity rather **ironic** when we consider what the first stanza is telling us?

MacCaig uses two examples of **repetition** in this stanza:

Q 2 Which **word** is repeated?

Q 3 Which **phrase** is repeated?

The description of how Julia spoke:

“very loud and very fast”

conveys her vigour and energy. That **repetition** of “very” emphasises these qualities, as well as perhaps also giving us a hint about why her Gaelic might have been particularly hard to follow.

The fact that lines 3 and 4 run along beside each other in **parallel**, and are so very similar in their wording, makes them feel very strong. They create a sort of barrier in the poem that goes with the important idea we find here of a communication barrier between the poet and his aunt.

This first stanza immediately sets up one of the key **themes** of this poem: frustration with this communication barrier.

Stanza Two

The second stanza gives us a clear picture of Julia. By showing us things that he remembers seeing when he was a child, MacCaig lets us see Julia’s personality, and her skills, as well as telling us about the tough life she led.

*“She wore men’s boots
when she wore any.
-I can see her strong foot,
stained with peat,
paddling with the treadle of the spinningwheel
while her right hand drew yarn
marvellously out of the air.”*

We get an unusual description of her clothing choices:

*“She wore men’s boots
when she wore any.”*

The fact she wears those boots suggests a number of things about Julia:

- that she was a highly practical person, choosing rugged footwear that suited her hard life
- that she worked outdoors a lot
- that there was no man in her life, so she had to do both traditionally female and traditionally male jobs
- that she was confident enough, or eccentric enough, not to worry what anybody thought about her unusual choice of footwear

MacCaig also mentions that she didn't wear those boots all the time. This also suggests things about Julia:

- that she might have been short of money, and was trying to make her boots last for as long as possible
- that she was so tough that she did not need to wear this sturdy footwear all the time - we do sometimes say people are "as tough as old boots"
- that she knew that certain jobs, like spinning, were best done barefoot, again suggesting how practical she was

Think about these questions:

Q 4 Which **tense** has the poem been in so far?

Q 5 Which **tense** does he use in line 7?

This choice of tense creates what we call **immediacy**: the sense that things are happening now, in front of our eyes, as we read. By using this technique, MacCaig gives the long-dead Julia life again.

The **word choice** of:

"her strong foot"

in this line again underlines how hardy and tough Julia was.

It's time for another little piece of context to help you understand the poem. We know now that the universe is made of 118 elements, basic substances which can be combined with other elements but which cannot be broken down. Chemists organise these into the Periodic Table.

In ancient times, people thought about the world in terms of just four **elements**: earth, air, fire, and water. These four **elements** were believed to be the very basics of life on Earth.

Look at MacCaig's use of detail here. Julia's "*strong foot*" was:

"stained with peat"

Q 6 What actually is peat?

Q 7, So, which element is MacCaig connecting his aunt to here?

By making this elemental connection, the poet is saying that his aunt was massively important, that she was one of the basic, fundamental parts of his life. That peat stain also tells us she was deeply connected to her land. The croft may have been hers, but she was also the croft's. Her land marked her.

In this present tense memory, MacCaig pictures his aunt spinning. It might be helpful to look on the Internet for an image of someone using a traditional spinning wheel. Julia probably kept a few sheep on her croft, and spun their raw, fluffy, wool into yarn - a long ball of woollen thread. This yarn could then be knitted into clothes, or perhaps sold to make Harris Tweed, giving Julia a source of income. If her yarn did go for tweed this again connects Julia to her environment, as tweed-making was such a traditional Hebridean craft and industry.

As her foot worked the treadle:

*“her right hand drew yarn
marvellously out of the air”*

Read those lines out to yourself. Can you hear the **long vowel sounds** in the words “drew” and “yarn”? Those elongated sounds go with the idea of drawing out, of pulling a length of newly made yarn.

The writer’s **word choice** of “*marvellously*” is important here. The young MacCaig was fascinated by Julia’s skills - so much so that what she did seemed magical and mysterious.

Q 8 Remember, any mention of the **elements** shows how vital Julia was, and how much she was part of the actual building blocks of life. Which element does MacCaig connect his aunt to in these lines?

Just as her boots earlier in this stanza showed that she was a practical woman with a tough life, so her spinning wheel shows the same. She had to paddle constantly with her foot to work it. She lived a physically demanding life, indoors as well as outside.

Stanza Three

The focus now switches to the young MacCaig, and how he felt about visiting his aunt.

*“Hers was the only house
where I’ve lain at night
in the absolute darkness
of a box bed, listening to
crickets being friendly.”*

Q 9 Stop and think. Imagine yourself as a much younger child, perhaps ten years old. How would you feel if your parents had sent you to spend the summer holidays almost three hundred miles from home, with no way of contacting them? And how would you feel if that meant staying with an old lady you couldn’t talk to?

Q 10 Now think again. As a child, were you afraid of the dark?

This third stanza opens with the word “*Hers*”. Although he is writing about himself for the moment, MacCaig begins the stanza by directing our attention to his aunt. This is another way for him to emphasise her significance.

When he stayed with Julia, he slept in a “*box bed*”. Again, you might want to look for a picture of this on the internet. Box beds would have been common in crofts and Scottish farm houses, and even in smaller city tenement flats. The bed was built into the wall. This was a really clever design. It saved space, as you could have cupboards below the mattress. Once the sleeper had climbed up into the bed, they could close a curtain, or a wooden door, which made the bed very cosy and private.

The poet seems to have been very happy tucked in there. We get the impression from this stanza that MacCaig felt safe and secure staying with his aunt, despite the “*absolute dark*” that some children might find threatening, and despite the language barrier.

Q 11 Which item of **word choice** in line 16 also shows how happy he felt there?

That word, by the way, also shows that when the writer stayed with his aunt, he felt in harmony with nature. We’ve already seen Julia’s deep connection to her environment: it seems to have rubbed off on her nephew too. It’s a valuable part of her legacy to him.

Stanza Four

The poem now returns to Julia, and to the hard life she lived:

*“She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.
She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends.
She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of threepenny bits
in a teapot.”*

Q 12 Which new **element** does MacCaig connect his aunt to here?

Q 13 Which two different details in this stanza connect Julia to this element?

Q 14 How does MacCaig also refer again to the element of air which was previously mentioned in stanza 2?

Q 15 MacCaig uses three **metaphors** in this stanza. Which three things does he say “*She was*”?

Let’s unpick some of those details.

*“She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.”*

tells us Julia didn't have running water in her croft, but instead had to pump it by hand from the ground and carry it around in buckets: exhausting, heavy work and further proof of her hard life.

The **word choice** of "*flouncing*" does several jobs at once. At first, it seems to be a **personification** of the water, making it seem alive and energetic as it splashed into the bucket below.

What is really going on though is that MacCaig is using a **transferred epithet** - a technique where a word (the epithet) seems to be about one thing, but is actually about something else (it gets transferred and moved across). "*Flouncing*" seems to be about the way the water moves, but it's really about Julia's arm energetically pumping up and down to raise the water up to ground level and into her bucket. Again we see her strength and vigour.

Then he tells us:

*"She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends."*

That clever phrase "*winds pouring wetly*" combines two sorts of weather, wind and rain. We think of rain as something that falls. This rain was "*pouring . . . round house-ends*". The wind was so wild that the rain blew sideways, telling us that the tough Julia lived in an extremely challenging environment.

The stanza ends with more evidence of her hard life:

*"She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of threepenny bits
in a teapot."*

Most of us can probably pop out to a shop if we need or want food. Julia's hard life included keeping her own hens, and going out to gather their eggs. Her black skirts were traditional for older ladies in that place and time, as well as sturdy and practical.

And she kept her money in a teapot. "*Threepenny bits*" - coins worth three old pennies - don't sound like much, but a threepenny bit when MacCaig was a young boy would be the equivalent of about £2 nowadays. Just like the boots earlier in the poem, this tiny mention tells us lots about Julia:

- that she had to be very careful with her money, and save up every bit she could get
- that she probably had no access to a bank, or perhaps did not trust anyone else to care for her money
- that she did trust the young MacCaig, as she let him know where she kept her hard-earned money
- that she probably liked to treat the young MacCaig - if he knows what Julia kept in the teapot, it's most likely because she used to give some of those threepenny bits to him

Julia almost stops being a human being in this stanza. The **repetition** of the metaphor “*she was*” followed by a noun means she becomes totally identified with her environment, and with the way of life that used to exist there. That ties in with another key **theme** of this poem. By celebrating Julia, MacCaig celebrates an entire culture and way of life that is long gone. She represents a traditional Scottish way of being that no longer exists. All those details that he cherishes and values about her now belong to a by-gone age.

Stanza Five

We get a strong sense of that loss in the final stanza:

*“Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.
By the time I had learned
a little, she lay
silenced in the absolute black
of a sandy grave
at Luskentyre.
But I hear her still, welcoming me
with a seagull's voice
across a hundred yards
of peatscapes and lazybeds
and getting angry, getting angry
with so many questions
unanswered”.*

After discussing her in terms of objects in stanza 4, MacCaig comes back to his aunt as a human being, **repeating** the vibrant, lively sentence of information that we saw at the beginning of the poem.

It even seems as if they broke through their frustrating communication barrier: he tells us he “*learned a little*” Gaelic himself.

But it was too late. After so much celebration of his aunt, a darker note enters the poem. “*By the time,*” he managed to acquire a little of her language, Julia was dead, “*silenced in the absolute black/ of a sandy grave/ at Luskentyre*”. He never did learn to communicate with her.

MacCaig’s **word choice** here is powerful. Julia, so “*loud*” before, is now “*silenced*”. It’s a startling **contrast** when she has been so vibrantly noisy and active up to this point.

The “*absolute black*” of her grave reminds us of the “*absolute darkness*” of the box bed in stanza 3, creating another **contrast**. The darkness of the box bed was cosy, comforting and safe. The darkness of Julia’s grave is bleak and final. Death has put an “*absolute*” and total end to her.

Except, she still lives in MacCaig's memory.

*“But I hear her still, welcoming me
with a seagull's voice
across a hundred yards
of peatscrapes and lazybeds”*

Q 16 Which tense does he use in line 30?

Q 17 Why is this important?

The poet's memories of Julia are so powerful that death cannot keep her quiet.

In fact she is still, in his memory, loud. A “*seagull's voice*” would be distinctive, and would catch your attention, but it would be a harsh sound, though she is calling to him to welcome him as he arrives to stay with her. Identifying her with “*a seagull*” again connects Julia to nature, and to the island environment she lived in.

Julia called out to the young MacCaig across “*a hundred yards/ of peatscrapes and lazybeds*”. This is another wonderful tiny detail that tells us many things at once:

- It tells us she really cared about him, as she was looking out for him from a long way off
- It tells us she had quite a large patch of land to take care of, showing us again what a tough life Julia had and how hard she worked
- It tells us again how practical she was: “*lazybeds*” are raised mounds of earth that stop vegetables rotting in wet ground, and make picking them easier as you don't have to bend down

The most negative part of the poem comes right at the end:

*“and getting angry, getting angry
with so many questions
unanswered”*

It is Julia who is “*getting angry*” here, just as it was her “*welcoming*” him a few lines above. But whose questions are going unanswered?

Is Julia angry because she is asking questions in Gaelic that the English-speaking young MacCaig cannot answer for her?

Or, Is Julia angry because the young MacCaig is asking her questions in English, and she can't answer him?

The last line of the whole poem is **just one word**, “*unanswered*”. This puts emphasis on the word. It reinforces that key **theme** of the poem, frustration because of the communication barrier between the child and the old woman.

Bringing it all together

Clearly, MacCaig is using this poem to celebrate Julia as a person, and an individual. However, she is not only there as herself. She also stands for a language and a culture that were changing and disappearing even when MacCaig was a boy 100 years ago. Like Julia, once this culture is gone, it's gone forever. Julia's way of life, like Julia herself, is part of history now.

Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through all material on 'Aunt Julia' 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 - quotation	Explanation of effect
repetition of "very"	<i>"very loud and very fast"</i>	Repetition emphasises her energy, vivacity, and also perhaps why her Gaelic is hard to understand
repetition of "I could not"	<i>"I could not answer her- I could not understand her"</i>	Create parallel lines that emphasise the barrier to communication. Immediately establishes the theme of frustration at this barrier <i>Continue yourself...</i>

You can carry on the rest of the table yourself. You'll need a whole sheet of paper, maybe two, as you need to add the following techniques:

Give **each** of these examples of word choice a separate row on your table: *strong, stained, marvellously, peat, air, hers, water, friendly, flouncing, silenced, absolute; a seagull's voice; a hundred yards; peatscapes and lazybeds*

Give **each** of these metaphors a separate row on your table: *buckets, wind, eggs*

Give **each** of these four examples of repetition a separate row on your table: repetition of a single word; two different repetitions of phrases; repetition of entire lines

Give **each** of these themes a separate row on your table: communication barrier; Julia's connection to her environment; a lost way of life and culture

Give **each** of these references to objects a separate row on your table: boots; a spinning wheel; a teapot of threepenny bits

Take a separate row on your table for Julia's connection to **each** of these elements: earth; air; water

Take a separate row on your table for **each** of the two contrasts in the final stanza

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

irony

parallel lines

present tense

long vowel sounds

personification

transferred epithet

single word final line