

Scottish Poetry Library

BASKING SHARK by Norman MacCaig

Resource by Jane Cooper

Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. Think of an animal that you like. Why do you like it?
2. Think of an animal that you dislike. Why do you feel this way about it?
3. Have you ever had a frightening experience with an animal? What happened?

Meeting The Text

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

1. Where was MacCaig on the day he writes about?
2. What was the event: what actually happened?

Basking Shark

*To stub an oar on a rock where none should be,
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea
Is a thing that happened once (too often) to me.* 3

*But not too often - though enough. I count as gain
That once I met, on a sea tin-tacked with rain,
That roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.* 6

*He displaced more than water. He shoggled me
Centuries back - this decadent townee
Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree.* 9

*Swish up the dirt and, when it settles, a spring
Is all the clearer. I saw me, in one fling,
Emerging from the slime of everything.* 12

*So who's the monster? The thought made me grow pale
For twenty seconds while, sail after sail,
The tall fin slid away and then the tail.* 15

Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially how MacCaig's initial response to his meeting with the shark changes as he considers both the animal and himself. 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.

The Title

"Basking Shark"

MacCaig's **title** here is absolutely vital to our understanding of the whole poem. It's the only time he actually tells us what kind of creature he met. We wouldn't understand the story of the poem, or the poet's ideas, without it.

Even if we don't know exactly what a "*basking*" one is, the word "*shark*" generally suggests something scary and dangerous, so the title gives us a clue that this poem may involve fear, and a sense of threat.

This is a good moment for you to find a picture of a basking shark, and to see what this creature looks like. It is the largest fish found in British waters, and is quite common around our western coast in spring and summer. Basking sharks can be up to ten metres long, and can weigh several tonnes, but they don't have true teeth, and they are no danger to humans. They swim slowly along, drifting on the current, with their huge mouths wide open, filter feeding on tiny sea creatures.

So, something that looks frightening actually isn't - an idea that helps us understand the poem.

Stanza One

MacCaig lived and worked in Edinburgh for most of his life, 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.

The poem seems to tell the story of something that happened to MacCaig one day while he was out in a small rowing boat off the west coast of Scotland.

*"To stub an oar on a rock where none should be,
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea
Is a thing that happened once (too often) to me."*

Two disturbing things happen to him while he is out rowing:

1. He bashes his oar against "a rock" hidden beneath the surface, but in a place where he knows there aren't any rocks.
2. Then the rock actually begins to move, rising up "out of the sea".

We can see why he might find this all very unsettling. He's in a place he's very familiar with (we know this, because he knows exactly where the rocks "should be") but something disconcerting happens to him there. The **word choice** of "rock", which also works as a **metaphor**, tells us he has bumped into something hard, grey, and immobile.

The first two lines of the poem begin with **infinitives**, "To stub," and "To have". The **infinitive** is the most basic form of a verb. You may be more used to thinking about the infinitive forms of verbs when you think of foreign languages, like the Polish infinitive *robic* which means to make or to do, or the French infinitive *etre*, to be. English infinitives always begin with "to" as in *to run*, *to sing*, *to sleep*, *to work* and so on.

Infinitives are basic forms of verbs, without person or tense. Infinitives don't let us know who is doing something, or when this happens. MacCaig deliberately doesn't write, "I stubbed my oar on a rock," or "Then the rock rose out of the sea." Using the infinitive forms of the verbs makes the poem feel puzzling. Who stubbed an oar? When did it rise? This imprecise confusion works well as he is having a confusing experience out there on the sea. It creates tension - we want to know what is going on. At this point in the poem, MacCaig wants to know what's going on too.

MacCaig describes the movement of this "rock" using a **neologism**, a new, made-up word.

Q 1 What **neologism** does he use for the way the shark rises?

It's a very clever invention. It makes us think of words we already know like *slow* and *lounge*. It's got a long, slow, -ou- vowel sound in the middle.

Q 2 What does this **neologism** suggest about the way the shark moved?

Q 3 How does this instantly change how we might feel about meeting the shark?

The poet then uses an **aside**, a technique where he steps away from the main narration of the poem to slip in a little side remark directly to the reader. That **aside** is sectioned off with brackets. He tells us this encounter happened:

“once (too often) to me”

“Once” tells us how unique, how unusual, the experience was; “(too often)” tells us once was enough. In fact, once was too much. That first part of the encounter, where MacCaig was disturbed and confused, is something he would rather not repeat.

Stanza Two

MacCaig now starts to explore that encounter with the shark:

*“But not too often - though enough. I count as gain
That once I met, on a sea tin-tacked with rain,
That roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.”*

He seems to be contradicting himself. The “(too often)” of line 3 has become “not too often” in line 4. It was “enough” because he did get quite a fright, but as he looks back on the experience he sees the value in the whole unexpected event.

Q 4 Which **word choice** in line 4 tells that he got something out of this experience?

This encounter turns out to be quite amazing, and to provoke all sorts of interesting thoughts and ideas in MacCaig’s mind.

The first of those is an immediate change in the way he sees the shark. In line 1 it was a “rock” - something not even alive. In line 5 he says he “met” it. We don’t meet rocks. We don’t meet animals either. That **word choice** of “met” makes the shark seem human. The poet who was unsettled and disconcerted in stanza 1 now has an almost friendly connection to the shark.

The writer uses a **metaphor** in line 5, saying the sea was:

“tin-tacked with rain”

Q 5 “Tin tack” is another way of saying drawing pin. What is MacCaig telling us about the way the surface of the sea looked? Try to draw this.

A sound technique here emphasises this:

Q 6 Which sound effect technique does MacCaig use in “tin-tacked”?

Q 7 How does this sound give us a better understanding of what the rain was like?

He tries to give us a sense of the shark's size, describing it as:

"That roomsized monster"

As you learned already, a basking shark can be ten metres long. That's a big room, probably longer than your English classroom at school. The stretched-out **long vowel sound** of -oo- in "room" makes us feel the size of the shark.

The **word choice** of "monster" here emphasises that size, and is really the final time in the poem when MacCaig makes the shark seem in any way frightening or unpleasant. When we think about its size, it is pretty scary.

Then he **contrasts** this with another aspect of the shark's size. It has a:

"matchbox brain"

This enormous animal has a tiny brain. It doesn't need a larger one. It doesn't need the intelligence to speed up and hunt prey. All it does is drift around with its mouth open, gathering plankton. This is one way in which the shark is very unlike us humans. We have huge brains, and it is our brain size that has made us the most advanced animal on Earth.

There is another sound effect technique at work here. The **repeated -m- sounds** in "roomsized monster . . . matchbox" are soft and almost comforting. They tell us again that although the shark is huge, and might look scary, it is actually no threat.

Stanza Three

MacCaig now begins to tell us how this all affected him. He moves from relating his encounter with the shark to reflecting on it.

*"He displaced more than water. He shoggled me
Centuries back - this decadent townee
Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree."*

Q 8 There is another **neologism** in line 7. Which word has MacCaig invented here?

We can unpick this word, and begin to see how the poet invented it. It may be based on the Scots word "shoogly" which means unstable and precarious. It sounds a bit like "wobbly". It has the same three first letters as "shook".

Q 9 Write a dictionary-style definition for MacCaig's new word.

It's a clumsy, bumpy-feeling, sort of word. It tells us **literally** what the shark did to MacCaig's oar by banging into it; it also tells us **metaphorically** what the shark did to the poet's ideas about himself.

The poet now starts to explore those ideas. He tells us the shark

“shoggled me/ Centuries back”

That **word choice** of “centuries” lets MacCaig start to explore ideas about evolution.

The very first idea he comes up with is to criticise himself. He is quite **self-deprecating** - he puts himself down in a gently humorous way - by calling himself a “*decadent townee*”. The **word choice** of “*decadent*” suggests that he is spoilt and lazy, and that he lives for luxury and self-indulgence. “*Townee*” makes him sound too urban to cope with the natural world of the sea and the shark.

Then he tells us that this townee:

“Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree”

The **word choice** of “*shook*” here tells us he was shaken by the encounter, but he is not suggesting fear now. He is well past feeling afraid of the shark. He means that his ideas about himself, and about the whole human race, were shaken up and challenged.

He uses the **metaphor** of a “*family tree*”. This is a term we use for a drawing that shows how all the members of a family are connected, how we are descended from our parents, grandparents and other ancestors. When Charles Darwin was developing his theory of evolution he also used the image of a tree, explaining the evolutionary connections between all living creatures as a tree of life. You can find some beautiful examples of this online.

So, by using the phrase “*family tree*” MacCaig is acknowledging that he is related to the shark by evolution. It’s very easy for humans to think of ourselves as the peak of that whole process, as if humanity was the best thing evolution ever came up with. MacCaig isn’t so sure.

Q 10 Which **metaphor** in line 9 suggests humanity isn’t utterly wonderful?

Q 11 How does the **metaphor** suggest this?

The poet isn’t convinced that humanity is magnificent. We’ll find out more soon about why he feels this way.

Stanza Four

MacCaig now becomes even more reflective, looking at how his ideas have changed.

*“Swish up the dirt and, when it settles, a spring
Is all the clearer. I saw me, in one fling,
Emerging from the slime of everything.”*

He uses **onomatopoeia**, a word whose sound suggests its meaning.

Q 12 Which word here is an example of this technique?

Q 13 Why is this a good word to use in a poem about an encounter at sea?

The opening of this stanza creates a **metaphor**:

*“Swish up the dirt and, when it settles, a spring
Is all the clearer.”*

Imagine someone putting their hand in running water - “a spring” - and swirling it up, so that all the dirt and earth on the bottom is stirred into the flow. Give it a minute or two to settle down and the running water will be “all the clearer”.

MacCaig is saying that when he first bumped into the shark he was scared and confused. That’s the dirt swishing up. But, when he considered the whole encounter it made him realise something. That’s the spring becoming clearer.

He tells us that he

*“saw me, in one fling,
Emerging from the slime of everything.”*

This **word choice** of “fling” is again quite **self-deprecating**. Far from seeing himself as something special or marvellous, MacCaig pictures himself as something evolution just flung out, something random and throwaway. The **word choice** of “fling” also suggests that this idea came to him very suddenly.

With his **word choice** of “slime” MacCaig is picturing a very early stage of evolution, when the world was a big sludgy mess of un-evolved potential. If he says that we all came from that “slime”, MacCaig is admitting that human beings aren’t all that wonderful. We don’t have the right to think of ourselves as anything particularly great or special. If it is the “slime of everything”, we are being reminded again of our connection to the shark. Everything that lives came, originally, from that same slime.

Stanza Five

All of this has led MacCaig to a key question:

*“So who’s the monster? The thought made me grow pale
For twenty seconds while, sail after sail,
The tall fin slid away and then the tail”.*

That question, “So who’s the monster?” is **rhetorical**. He doesn’t give it a direct answer in the poem, but expects us to think about it. It is the question the whole poem has been leading up to, and the answer to it is quite shocking: “The thought made me grow pale.”

In stanza two he called the shark a “monster” but even then this was only a reference to its startling size. It is not its size that makes a creature truly monstrous; it is behaviour. Humanity is the real monster. It is humans who murder, who destroy, who start wars. But MacCaig doesn’t say any of that explicitly. His question is a **rhetorical** one, and he leaves it to us to see and work out the answer.

His encounter is almost over, and the shark is about to depart.

Q 14 Look at your watch or phone and count “*twenty seconds*”. What do we notice again about the shark from the poet’s use of phrase?

Q 15 Which **word choice** does MacCaig use to suggest the shark’s fins?

In stanza one, the shark was a “*rock*”: solid, grey and heavy. Now he writes about it as if it were an elegant yacht. His encounter with this animal, and the thoughts the encounter has provoked, have totally changed the way that he views it, and how he views himself. Supposedly civilised humanity now seems “*decadent*” at best and monstrous at worst, while the shark now seems graceful, with the **repetition** of “*sail*” emphasising this still further.

Bringing it all together

Q 16 Write a few sentences in your own words to explain and sum up MacCaig’s ideas in this poem.

The structure of the whole poem

Look again at the whole poem as it is laid out at the start of this resource. You should be able to see that it looks very neat and regular.

Q 16 How many stanzas are there?

Q 17 How many lines are in each stanza?

Q 18 Work out the rhyme scheme of the poem. Label the first rhyming sound, at the end of line 1, as A, and use the same letter at the end of any line where that sound recurs. Label the next new rhyming sound as B and use the same letter at the end of any line where that sound recurs.

The rhythm, sometimes called the **metre** of the poem is also absolutely **regular throughout**. Read the following explanation, and then read the poem aloud to yourself to feel and experience what the explanation tells you:

- In each stanza, the first two lines have five syllables that are stressed, five syllables we lean on and emphasise as we say them aloud.
- In each stanza, the final line has four stressed syllables.

We can show the stressed syllables like this:

To stub an oar on a rock where none should be,
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea
Is a thing that happened once (too often) to me.

We’ve used the first stanza as an example, but remember that this same pattern is used in every stanza.

What we have here is a poem with an absolutely regular rhythm, rhyme, and verse pattern. If you have studied any of the other MacCaig poems in the set text list, you will know that they are not like this. He was not in the habit of using such regular structures.

So, if he does take the unusual step, for him, of writing this way, there must be reasons for this.

- One reason may be that, by using a structure that is very unusual for him, MacCaig is saying that his encounter with the shark was a very unusual experience
- Using rhyme, rhythm and metre to make strong connections within and across the language of the poem might be a reminder of the way all living things are connected through evolution.
- The regularity of the rhythm and rhyme may also be an echo of the regularity of waves - appropriate for a poem that is set at sea.

Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through all the work on '*Basking Shark*' you should know the poem very well. It's time to revise your knowledge of Morgan'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 - a quotation	Explanation
title	<i>"Basking Shark"</i>	Only time in the whole poem we are clearly told what he encountered. Title is necessary to our understanding of the poem. The mention of a shark suggest possible threat and fear
Use of infinitives	<i>"To stub . . . To have ."</i>	Puzzles the reader: we wonder who this is happening to; creates tension <i>Continue yourself...</i>

For a grid about *Basking Shark* you also need to work with these techniques:

Take a separate row on your table for each of these different examples of word choice: *rock, gain, met, monster, centuries, decadent, townee, shook, fling, slime, everything, twenty seconds, sail*

Take a separate row on your table for each of these neologisms: *slounge, shoggled*

Take a separate row on your table for each of these different examples of imagery: *tin-tacked*; *family tree*; *wrong branch*; the metaphor about swishing up dirt

a word with both literal and metaphorical meanings

two examples of self-deprecation

title

use of infinitives

aside

alliteration

contrasting sizes

long vowel sound

use of “*m*” sounds

onomatopoeia

rhetorical question

repetition of *sail*

metre/ rhythm throughout poem

rhyme throughout poem