

Pre-release poetry: 'Aunt Julia' (page 12)

Norman MacCaig pays tribute to his aunt who lived a hard life on the island of Harris in the Western Isles of Scotland. Like many islanders, she had a spinning wheel for producing the famous Harris tweed. She spoke Gaelic which he could not understand.

Glossary:

Gaelic – a Celtic language spoken in the Highlands of Scotland

peat - an accumulation of partially decayed vegetation which forms in wetlands such as bogs

treadle – rocking lever operated by the foot to drive a spinning wheel

yarn – continuous twisted strand of fibre produced on a spinning wheel

box bed – bed built into a recess in a traditional Highland cottage, separated from the main room by a curtain or wooden panel

threepennybit – old eight-sided pre-decimal coin (worth about 1p)

Luskentyre – tiny village with spectacular sandy beach on the Island of Harris

lazybeds - traditional way of growing crops in small patches of soil using ridges of soil

Content

Stanza 1

- a child's memory of his aunt
- main recollection is her language – Gaelic – which he could not understand

Stanza 2

- describes his aunt and how she seemed strange to him e.g. 'barefoot', or wearing 'men's boots'
- his description gives insights into her way of life

Stanza 3

- he recalls the strange experience of sleeping in a box bed

Stanza 4

- vivid images capture aspects of her life e.g. carrying buckets of water as there is no running water

Stanza 5

- by the time he learned some Gaelic, it was too late to communicate with his Aunt: she had died

Tone and Language

- some language is plain and factual - e.g. the opening two lines
- metaphors seem to define her hard life: 'She was buckets...'
- 'flouncing' is an example of personification and suggest something about Aunt Julia's character
- her 'seagull's voice' is a metaphor used to describe her loud, incomprehensible voice
- 'peatscrapes' may be a Scottish dialect word – 'lazybeds' certainly is
- the repetition of 'getting angry' emphasises her frustration
- dark images are used in the poem e.g. 'stained with peat'
- her loud, fast Gaelic voice is the most memorable thing about her; when she is dead she is 'silenced'

Other culture

- most obviously the Gaelic language – it seems alien as it could not be understood
- description of features of the landscape
- the spinning wheel used for generations to make Harris tweed
- the traditional box bed
- the use of an actual place name: Luskentyre

Highlands culture

Find out more about the culture of the Island of Harris.

This link will give you the history oh Harris tweed: http://www.harristweed.com/fabric_hist.htm

See a Highland woman using a spinning wheel here:

<http://www.gonomad.com/features/0608/scotland-images/spinning-wheel.jpg>

Find out about box beds here: <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/box-beds.aspx>

See what a lazybed looks like here:

http://www.geograph.org.uk/photos/20/07/200780_e018cb13.jpg

Questions

1. What precisely does Norman MacCaig remember about his aunt? Make a list of all the details that are mentioned. What do they suggest about her personality and his feelings towards her?
2. How does he use language and imagery to suggest her character and lifestyle?
3. Which lines are repeated in the poem? Why are they repeated? How do they link with the closing lines of the poem?
4. Which adverb is used to describe his aunt's spinning? What does it add to our understanding of how he sees his aunt?
5. From the evidence of the poem, what impression do you form of life on the Island of Harris? Refer to details in your answer.
6. What does the metaphor 'a seagull's voice' tell you about his aunt and his relationship with her?
7. There are lots of images of darkness in the poem. What are they and what do they tell you about his aunt's life?
8. What questions do you think were unanswered for Aunt Julia?
9. Do you think MacCaig enjoyed spending time with his aunt? What gives you that impression?