Hotel Room, 12th Floor

SUMMARY

Looking out the window of a hotel room in New York City one morning, the speaker sees a helicopter, which resembles some kind of broken bug, flying close to the Empire State Building, which looks to the speaker like an enormous version of a drill you'd find in a dentist office. The helicopter lands on top of the tall PanAmerican Airlines building. Night arrives like a traveler from some distant land, and the speaker imagines the lights from all the rows and rows of building windows as a kind of gunfire, shooting out at the wild, barbarous darkness.

This light is not enough to defeat the darkness, however, and as the speaker lies down in their hotel bed with a radio and TV on either side, they can hear wild yelps and cries rising up from the narrow streets far below. These sparkling streets are like canyons in the earth. The speaker can hear the sirens of police cars and ambulances as they rush to help injured people, as well as the sounds of rough arguments in apartments. The speaker envisions the sidewalks being covered in blood.

Wild, uncivilized territory is never some faraway place, the speaker says, and no fences human beings build can stop the barbarous darkness from getting in.

THEMES

CIVILIZATION AND THE DARKNESS OF HUMAN NATURE

Norman MacCaig's "Hotel Room, 12th floor" suggests that no amount of human progress can defeat the essential darkness of human nature. The speaker, a visitor to the U.S. staying at a hotel in New York, finds the city's massive skyscrapers ugly and unnerving and compares the city after dark to the "Wild West"—the historic American frontier that white settlers once sought to tame. As night falls and the sounds of sirens and screams rise from the streets far below, the poem suggests that humanity's violent instincts still lurk beneath the wonder and ingenuity of even the most modern societies.

Despite being in one of the world's most advanced cities, the speaker seems unimpressed by the surrounding feats of technology. The speaker calls a passing helicopter a "damaged insect" and deems the Empire State Building, the tallest free-standing building in the world at the time, a "giant dentist's drill." These images convey the speaker's sense of unease and discomfort, and they also suggest that there's something broken and frightening about the modern world.

When night then falls, the speaker describes a kind of battle between "midnight" and "the million lit windows" of the city's buildings, whose lights are like pops of gunfire ineffectually trying to pierce the darkness. People cling to markers of technological progress, the speaker implies here, in order to feel like they're living in a civilized world, but none of this technology can actually "keep the midnight" (or wildness of human nature) "out."

Things get worse after night fully envelops the city and sounds of violence and terror fill the streets below. As the speaker sits in their hotel room between a radio and television set, these modern comforts (which were relatively new at the time the poem was written) aren't enough to drown out the sounds of "police cars and ambulances racing" toward scenes of "broken bones" and "harsh screaming."

The speaker concludes by comparing modern-day New York to the historic "Wild West," suggesting that modern society is nothing more than a thin veil draped over humanity's violent instincts. The speaker's description of the city's narrow streets as "glittering canyons and gulches" evokes the landscape of the western U.S., once considered a dangerous new frontier by white settlers. The "warwhoops continually ululating" between the city's massive buildings are meant to evoke the stereotypical sounds made by the American Indians those settlers clashed with.

On one level, this comparison of New York to the Wild West reminds readers that the modern world was built by force and subjugation: these settlers believed it their duty to tame the western wilderness and "civilize" its indigenous peoples (very often via outright violence). At the same time, the poem is saying that this wild, brutal world never disappeared. The "frontier is never somewhere else," the speaker concludes, meaning that the potential for chaos and violence is always present in human beings—no matter how many fancy skyscrapers they build.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

This morning I watched from here

The first line of "Hotel Room, 12th Floor" plays off the poem's title: based on that title, readers can assume that "here" refers to the speaker's room on the 12th floor of a hotel building. At

the time this poem was written, this would be one of the higher floors—and, as such, likely one of the more expensive ones.

The fact that the speaker is staying in a *hotel* also implies that this person is a visitor—that they've come from somewhere else to "here." This positions the speaker as an outsider looking in on another culture or place.

The speaker also specifies the poem starts at a certain time of day: "this morning." It's important to note that "this morning" refers to the past tense (along with the past-tense verb "watched"), which means the speaker is looking *back* on something that happened. The poem thus begins with a reflection; the speaker has had time to consider what they've seen and perhaps has a bit of insight to share.

Finally, the word "watched" is an interesting word choice because "to watch" something is typically considered a passive act. This suggests the speaker did not feel directly involved in what was happening outside their window. They possibly felt more like an onlooker, which emphasizes their position as a visitor or outsider.

LINES 2-5

a helicopter skirting ...
... the PanAm skyscraper.

The speaker goes on to describe the sight from their hotel room window (or balcony).

First, the speaker sees a helicopter buzzing about "like a damaged insect." This simile hints at the speaker's true feelings about the city: the image of an injured bug suggests that the speaker feels like something is wrong with the scene (and perhaps that technology itself is a perversion of the natural world).

The next lines build upon this uneasy feeling. This helicopter is flying close to the Empire State Building, a fact that reveals that the speaker is in New York City. This specific setting is important: with its massive buildings and bustling culture, New York City has long been considered one of the most advanced cities in the world and a center of human civilization. In fact, at the time the poem was written, the Empire State Building was the tallest free-standing building on Earth. As such, it was a major symbol of humanity's technological prowess.

And yet, the speaker isn't exactly impressed. The speaker uses a metaphor to describe the Empire State Building as a "jumbo size dentist's drill," comparing the skyscraper to an enormous version of a tool from a dentist's office that people typically dread. This image, combined with that of the helicopter as an insect, suggests that the speaker feels deeply uncomfortable being surrounded by skyscrapers—and perhaps that the speaker even believes that something is *wrong* with such supposed wonders of civilization. The phrase "dentist's drill" is also an example of alliteration and perhaps mimics the sound of a drill whirring or helicopter blades spinning.

Finally, in the fifth line, the helicopter lands on top of the "PanAm skyscraper," another skyscraper. Named for the (now-defunct) airline Pan American Airways, this building was iconic at the time MacCaig was writing. The poem is calling out and undermining two very specific, very famous markers of human achievement.

LINES 6-7

But now midnight ...
... from foreign places.

The "morning" from line 1 has passed. In line 6, the speaker brings the poem into the present tense and signals that a major shift is happening: "But now midnight has come in."

That "But" is a little ominous! Also note how the speaker subtly personifies the night itself here, describing "midnight" as though it were a traveler as arriving from some distant land. Night seems to have agency of its own, bringing darkness across the globe as the world turns. The phrase "has come in" suggests that this darkness isn't welcome or invited, while the enjambment at the end of line 6 subtly evokes night's movement, quickly pushing readers across the line break:

> But now midnight has come in
> from foreign places. [...]

Darkness and night traditionally symbolize things like the unknown, evil, and chaos. The arrival of night thus builds upon the uneasy feelings the speaker had looking at the skyscrapers earlier in the poem.

LINES 7-9

Its uncivilised darkness ...
... ups and acrosses

In the second half of line 7, the speaker builds on the personification of the night by describing the darkness it brings as "uncivilised" (note that this is the British spelling of "uncivilized.")

That word, "uncivilised," helps crystallize the speaker's unease from earlier in the poem. Darkness, in this context, represents the primal, wild, untamed world—something humanity supposedly left behind as they built cosmopolitan, technologically sophisticated cities like New York. And yet, none of those giant skyscrapers from the previous lines could prevent "darkness" from falling across the city.

In line 8, the speaker describes the light emanating from the windows of nearby buildings as shots being fired out at this darkness. There are "a million lit windows," the speaker says more specifically, again conveying the grand scale of New York City. Those electric lights are signs of human progress, which the speaker envisions here as being engaged in a battle against the creeping darkness.

The mention of "foreign places," "uncivilised darkness," and gunfire also starts to paint a picture of a world presumably very different from the one the speaker currently inhabits: that of the historical American frontier, the Old West of the 17th to 19th centuries.

LINES 10-14

But midnight is ...
... canyons and gulches—

The second stanza begins with the speaker extending the personification of midnight. "But midnight is not so easily defeated," says the speaker, revealing that the "million lit windows" were not enough to keep out the darkness.

Again, those windows represent human progress and technology, as well as the vast scale of New York City (considered to be a pillar of modern civilization). None of that, the speaker says, is enough to stop the darkness in its tracks; despite the ability to fly a helicopter around skyscrapers, society cannot escape its most brutal instincts.

The poem then returns to the speaker in their hotel room, now lying in bed between a television and a radio—two staples of modern society when the poem was written and which represent yet more signs of human technological prowess. Neither of these items can drown out the disturbing sounds from the city, however; the speaker can still "hear / the wildest warwhoops" echoing through the narrow streets far below. (The word "ululating" means that these are long, loud, emotional cries echoing through the streets.)

"Warwhoops" might be a colorful way of describing the wail of police and ambulance sirens, but they also suggest a vision of the old American frontier: they recall stereotypical depictions of sounds made in battle by American Indians. The speaker's description of the streets between buildings as "glittering canyons and gulches" is then a haunting metaphor that evokes both the landscape of the western U.S. and the sparkle of headlights.

Altogether, the speaker compares New York City after dark to the "Wild West"—a place once considered by white American settlers to be wild, lawless, and uncivilized. On one level, these lines suggest that New York City remains all those things—that the frontier was never tamed. These lines also remind readers that modern society was built on a foundation of violence (the native peoples already occupying this land were routinely displaced, killed, or forcefully assimilated into white society in order to "civilize" them).

LINES 15-18

police cars and ...
... glazed on sidewalks.

The sounds of police and ambulance sirens fill the streets as these vehicles rush toward "broken bones" (i.e., injured people), "harsh screaming" (i.e., people shouting out of fear or anger), and "blood glazed on sidewalks."

These disturbing images illustrate the kind of brutality that happens in the "darkness." They are also examples of synecdoche, as the speaker reduces people to their voices and body parts. In doing so, the speaker suggests that modern society devalues human life.

"Coldwater flats," which the speaker refers to in line 17, are typically cheap, run-down apartments that provide only cold water to cut down costs. The fact that these apartments are so close to all the violence the speaker mentions suggests that, despite humanity's supposed progress, the poorer and less privileged members of society continue to suffer.

The image of these dismal apartments also contrasts starkly with that of the speaker's hotel room and the massive skyscrapers mentioned earlier in the poem. The progress of civilization, the speaker implies, is not felt by everyone equally.

LINES 19-21

The frontier is ...
... the midnight out.

Despite being set in modern-day New York City, the speaker has evoked the old American frontier throughout the poem. Through its mention of "warwhoops," "canyons and gulches," gunfire, and bloody violence, the poem has suggested that America's modern cities aren't all that different from the "Wild West" that white settlers once considered chaotic, threatening, and violent.

The word "frontier" itself means the farthest edge or absolute limit of something. Here, it specifically refers to the line between civilization and wilderness—or between order and chaos, peace and violence. That line, the speaker insists, isn't something far off in the distance. Instead, the "frontier" exists wherever human beings do, even in cities that are supposedly the height of human progress.

In declaring that "no stockades / can keep the midnight out," the speaker is arguing that there's no fence or enclosure people can build to protect themselves from violence, disorder, and wildness. No matter how tall the skyscrapers, "midnight" will always find a way in. The speaker suggests that the border between a "civilized" and "uncivilized" society is an illusion because darkness is simply a part of human nature.

SYMBOLS

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Light in the poem symbolizes order, progress, and civilization itself. Darkness, meanwhile, symbolizes chaos, disorder, terror, and so forth—all the things that aren't supposed to exist in a "civilized" society.

The poem begins in the"morning," when the speaker can see the city's skyscrapers clearly. A helicopter buzzes around as well. These daytime images of technological achievement reflect how supposedly advanced the city is, marking it out as a center of civilization and progress.

Yet things take a turn when "midnight" swoops across the city, bringing with it "uncivilised darkness." The speaker describes the electric lights from "a million lit windows" of the city's buildings shooting out at the night as though it were a physical enemy. This battle between light and darkness represents a battle between order and chaos, progress and destruction.

Yet even a million lights aren't enough to brighten up the darkness of "midnight," the speaker says—implying that no amount of human technological prowess can defeat the inherent darkness of human nature. Instead, night covers the city and the world becomes increasingly chaotic and violent, ultimately reminding the speaker of the days of the wild, lawless American frontier.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** "But now midnight has come in / from foreign places. Its uncivilised darkness / is shot at by a million lit windows, all / ups and acrosses"
- **Lines 10-11:** "But midnight is not / so easily defeated."
- **Lines 15-18:** "police cars and ambulances racing / to the broken bones, the harsh screaming / from coldwater flats, the blood / glazed on sidewalks."
- **Lines 20-21:** "And no stockades / can keep the midnight out."

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The speaker uses a simile in line 2 when comparing a helicopter flying around the Empire State building to a "damaged insect."

One might think that a helicopter buzzing around a huge skyscraper would be an impressive sight and a sign of just how advanced human technology has become. Yet the image of an injured insect flying around in distress certainly isn't a pleasant one. People also often consider insects pesky or annoying. This simile thus suggests that the scene looks off to the speaker—that there's something broken or wrong here. This technologically advanced, highly "civilized" setting isn't impressive to the speaker but rather unsettling and strange.

The fact that the speaker compares a machine to a bug might also suggest something about the relationship between huamnity and nature. That is, the simile here might subtly suggest that human technology is something of a perversion of nature or an affront to the natural world.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "a helicopter skirting like a damaged insect / the Empire State Building"

METAPHOR

The poem's speaker uses many metaphors throughout to convey just how surreal and unsettling New York City feels. Take lines 3-4, for example, where the speaker calls the Empire State Building a "jumbo size dentist's drill."

This is a pretty scathing description of what was the tallest freestanding building in the world at the time! Nobody *likes* dentists' drills, which are linked with pain and rot (in the sense that they're used to extract cavities). This metaphor suggests that, instead of being a miraculous, awe-inspiring sight, the speaker finds the Empire State Building disturbing and bizarre.

Later, the speaker uses another metaphor when comparing the sounds of the city after dark to:

> the wildest of warwhoops continually ululating
> through
> the glittering canyons and gulches—

It's possible that the speaker is specifically comparing the sounds of the police and ambulance sirens to echoing "warwhoops." In any case, this word evokes stereotypical depictions of American Indian battle cries. The comparison of the city's narrow streets between its tall buildings to "canyons and gulches" also evokes the landscape of the old American frontier—the "Wild West" that white settlers sought to tame and "civilize" in the 18th and 19th centuries.

By metaphorically depicting New York City as the frontier, the speaker is implying that this city isn't as "civilized" as people think. Modern progress and technology can't erase humanity's tendency toward violence and destruction.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "the Empire State Building, that / jumbo size dentist's drill"
- **Lines 6-9:** "But now midnight has come in / from foreign places. Its uncivilised darkness / is shot at by a million lit windows, all / ups and acrosses"
- **Lines 12-14:** "hear / the wildest of warwhoops continually ululating through / the glittering canyons and gulches"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In addition to its individual metaphors, the poem also contains one longer, extended metaphor that compares New York City after dark to the Old West. Through this metaphor, the poem suggests that civilized society is an illusion and that humanity's

darker impulses can't be tamed.

The speaker begins building this metaphor in the first stanza, personifying "midnight" as a sort of "foreign" entity that swoops over the city and brings with it "uncivilised darkness." The "million lit windows" in the city's skyscrapers seem to fight back, the speaker presenting their lights as "shot[s]" fired into the darkness. These metaphors create an image of battle—between light and darkness, civilization and wildness.

That battle continues into the next stanza, where the speaker declares that "midnight is not / so easily defeated." In other words, all those lights—and the world of civilized, advanced technology they represent—can't stop darkness from overtaking the city.

Later in this stanza, the speaker mentions "warwhoops" echoing through the city's "glittering canyons and gulches." In the dark, the city's streets mirror the landscape of the American frontier—a place that white settlers once considered wild and dangerous.

In the last stanza, the speaker makes all these comparisons even more explicit. "The frontier is never / somewhere else," the speaker says, meaning that the border between civilization and wilderness is always with people, wherever they go. And in saying "no stockades / can keep the midnight out," the speaker once again brings to mind an image of the western U.S. of centuries past ("stockades" refers to security fences or animal enclosures made from logs). The speaker is saying that nothing people build—no amount of supposed progress—can stop darkness from setting in because this darkness is part of human nature.

It's also important to remember that white settlers in the days of the Wild West believed it was their right and destiny to tame the land and its native inhabitants, through forceful assimilation, displacement, and outright violence. Tying modern-day New York City to the history of white western expansion thus implies that civilization itself is built on a foundation of terror and cruelty.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-11:** "But now midnight has come in / from foreign places. Its uncivilised darkness / is shot at by a million lit windows, all / ups and acrosses / But midnight is not / so easily defeated."
- **Lines 13-14:** "the wildest of warwhoops continually ululating through / the glittering canyons and gulches—"
- **Lines 19-21:** "The frontier is never / somewhere else. And no stockades / can keep the midnight out."

ENJAMBMENT

Nearly every line in "Hotel Room, 12th Floor" is enjambed. This gives the poem a sense of building momentum and intensity as readers are pushed along from one line to the next without breaks or pauses.

For a poem that's about human civilization being something of an illusion, all this enjambment makes sense: it prevents things from feeling too contained or controlled and instead evokes the swift, strong pull of the darkness and chaos that descends on the city.

Frequent enjambment might also subtly mirror the overwhelming physical structure of New York City itself, whose seemingly endless streets wind far below the speaker. The device suggests the movement of specific sounds and images within the poem, too—such as the "continually ululating" "warwhoops" that bounce "through / the glittering canyons and gulches," and the "skirting" of the helicopter as it flies around in the sky outside the speaker's hotel room.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "here / a"
- **Lines 2-3:** "insect / the"
- **Lines 3-4:** "that / jumbo"
- **Lines 4-5:** "landing / on"
- **Lines 6-7:** "in / from"
- **Lines 7-8:** "darkness / is"
- **Lines 8-9:** "all / ups"
- **Lines 10-11:** "not / so"
- **Lines 11-12:** "between / a"
- **Lines 12-13:** "hear / the"
- **Lines 13-14:** "through / the"
- **Lines 15-16:** "racing / to"
- **Lines 16-17:** "screaming / from"
- **Lines 17-18:** "blood / glazed"
- **Lines 19-20:** "never / somewhere"
- **Lines 20-21:** "stockades / can"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies "midnight" and "darkness" throughout, allowing them to act like characters with their own interests and motivations. This personification helps to dramatize a battle between civilization (represented by light) and chaos/violence/disorder (represented by darkness).

In the poem's opening stanza, for example, the speaker describes "midnight" arriving in the city like a traveler from a "foreign" land. At first, then, the poem treats the darkness as something distinctly *separate* from the city. The lights from "a million lit windows" shoot out at this darkness, attacking it as though it were some foreign invader.

"But midnight is not so easily defeated," the speaker continues, again imbuing the darkness with a sense of will and agency. In treating darkness like a human army, the poem starts to imply that this darkness isn't actually some "foreign" entity threatening to overtake human civilization but rather *part* of human civilization.

The personification of darkness implies that the same violent instincts that "built civilization" always have and always will be a part of humanity. "Darkness" is inseparable from human nature.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-11:** "But now midnight has come in / from foreign places. Its uncivilised darkness / is shot at by a million lit windows, all / ups and acrosses / But midnight is not / so easily defeated."
- **Lines 20-21:** "And no stockades / can keep the midnight out."

SYNECDOCHE

The poem uses synecdoche in lines 16-18:

> to the broken bones, the harsh screaming
> from coldwater flats, the blood
> glazed on sidewalks.

On one level, these can be read as literal sounds and images. The speaker is simply describing the sites and sounds of the city after dark, when chaos and violence seem to take over.

At the same time, each of these things refers to a part of the human body. Those "police cars and ambulances" aren't just racing to pile of bones on the street, but rather to an injured *person*. Likewise, that "harsh screaming" comes from a human being crying out in terror, pain, or fear; and "the blood" on those "sidewalks" has come from *someone* who's bleeding. The use of synecdoche here reduces people to their body parts, in turn dehumanizing them.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-18:** "to the broken bones, the harsh screaming / from coldwater flats, the blood / glazed on sidewalks."

CONSONANCE

The consonance in the poem lends intensity to certain images and also evokes the speaker's uneasy feelings about the city. Take line 2, for example, where sharp /k/ and /t/ sounds of "helicopter skirting like a damaged insect" seem to suggest the speaker's disgust for this sight. And later, the hissing sibilance of "Its uncivilised darkness" is subtly threatening, calling to mind the way that this frightening darkness creeps across the city.

That eerie sibilance appears again in the poem's final lines, where it combines with more of those harsh /k/ sounds and ends the poem on a frightening, disturbing note:

> somewhere else. And no stockades
> can keep [...]

Elsewhere, consonance brings the sounds of the city itself to life. Take the liquid /l/ sounds that echo throughout lines 13-14:

> [...]
>
> [...] continually ululating through
> the glittering canyons and gulches

This consonance, combined with the heavy alliteration of "glittering and gulches," evokes the emotional cries that reverbate between the city's skyscrapers.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "helicopter skirting like," "insect"
- **Line 4:** "dentist's drill"
- **Line 7:** "from foreign," "Its uncivilised darkness"
- **Line 11:** "bed, between"
- **Line 13:** "wildest," "warwhoops," "continually ululating"
- **Line 14:** "glittering," "gulches"
- **Line 16:** "broken bones," "screaming"
- **Line 17:** "from coldwater flats"
- **Lines 17-18:** "blood / glazed"
- **Line 20:** "somewhere else"
- **Lines 20-21:** "stockades / can keep"

ALLITERATION

The poem doesn't feature much alliteration, but the device does pop up a few times. Like consonance, alliteration adds emphasis to some of the poem's striking images.

In line 4, for example, the thudding /d/ sounds of "dentist's drill" make this surreal image (of the Empire State Building as a giant dentist's tool) stand out to the reader. Likewise, the heavy /g/ sounds of "glittering" and "gulches" and the bold /b/ sounds of "broken bones" add intensity to the speaker's vivid descriptions of the city. Later, the echoing /w/ sounds of "wildest" and "warwhoops" bring those cries to life on the page.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "dentist's drill"
- **Line 11:** "bed, between"
- **Line 13:** "wildest," "warwhoops"
- **Line 14:** "glittering," "gulches"
- **Line 16:** "broken bones"

VOCABULARY

The Empire State Building (Lines 2-3) - New York City's famous Empire State Building was constructed in 1931 and remained the world's tallest building until 1970.

PanAm (Line 5) - PanAm is an abbreviation for Pan American World Airways, a major international airline that existed from

1927 to 1991.

Uncivilised (Line 7) - "Uncivilised" is the British spelling of "uncivilized," an adjective used to describe someone or something considered uncultured, wild, coarse, or vulgar.

Ululating (Line 13) - Long, high-pitched crying that resembles wailing or howling.

Gulches (Line 14) - Steep ravines. In the poem, "gulches" is used as a metaphor for spaces between the city's skyscrapers.

Frontier (Lines 19-20) - A border between two countries or settlements; the outmost limit or boundary of something. Within the poem, "frontier" specifically evokes early American pioneers heading west.

Stockades (Lines 20-21) - Enclosures made from logs meant for defense or fencing in livestock.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Hotel Room, 12th floor" is a free verse poem that doesn't follow any traditional form. It consists of 21 lies broken into three stanzas. The first and second of these each have nine lines, while the third has just three.

The short third stanza clearly stands apart from the first two and acts as a kind of commentary on everything that's happened so far in the poem. While those longer stanzas describe what happens in the city as day transitions to the darkness of night, the final stanza makes a broad philosophical statement about the darkness of human nature.

METER

"Hotel Room, 12th Floor" is written in free verse, which means that there's no regular meter here. This is common for contemporary poetry and lends the poem a conversational tone. Readers get the sense that they're hearing the speaker's intimate thoughts and observations as they happen.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Hotel Room, 12th Floor" doesn't follow a regular rhyme scheme. Instead, it feels unpredictable and uncontained. A steady pattern of rhyme might feel too rigid and controlled for a poem about chaos and darkness overtaking civilization.

SPEAKER

Norman MacCaig's trips to the U.S. may have influenced the poem, but there's no reason readers have to take this poem's speaker as being the poet himself. All readers know is that the speaker is someone visiting New York City.

The fact that the speaker is staying in a *hotel* implies that this person isn't actually *from* New York. As such, the speaker has an outsider's perspective on the city and its famous buildings. Instead of being impressed, however, the speaker seems disturbed and even repulsed. They describe the Empire State Building as a giant "dentist's drill," for example, and think a buzzing helicopter looks likes "a damaged insect."

It's also fair to assume that the speaker is either middle or upper class. A 12th-floor hotel room implies that they're staying in a high-rise building (at least, what would have been a high-rise in the 1960s, when the poem was written). They're thus far above the "coldwater flats" below, which are apartments that lack hot running water and are typically occupied by people of a lower socioeconomic status. The speaker seems acutely aware (and disapproving) of the distance between these worlds.

SETTING

"Hotel Room, 12th Floor," is set in, well, a hotel room on the 12th floor of a building! The mention of the Empire State Building and PanAm skyscraper reveals that this hotel is located in New York City. (The mention of the PanAmerican skyscraper also dates the poem to the mid-20th century, given that PanAmerican Airlines no longer exists.)

The setting plays an important role in the poem for several reasons:

- For one thing, this setting establishes that the speaker is a visitor to New York and thus has an outsider's perspective on the city.
- The fact that the speaker's hotel room is on the 12th floor also places the speaker far above the violence and terror that take place below when night falls. In this way, the poem suggests that a sharp divide exists in this city: between the upper-class world of upper-level hotel rooms and skyscrapers and the lower-class world of "coldwater flats" and sidewalks "glazed" with blood.
- Finally, the fact that this is specifically New York City situates the poem in a cultural, technological, and economic hub of modern life. The city's skyline, filled with enormously tall buildings, is famous worldwide. the Empire State Building was in fact the tallest free-standing building in the world when this poem was written.

Setting the poem in New York City is vital to the poem's point. Even here, in one of the most supposedly civilized and advanced cities in the world, the darkness of human nature exists right alongside human progress.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Scottish poet Norman MacCaig published "Hotel Room, 12th Floor" in his 1968 collection *Rings on a Tree*. MacCaig had visited New York City a few times in the mid-'60s, and these trips undoubtedly inspired the perspective of this poem.

MacCaig was a popular writer in his lifetime, known for his often humorous poems written in clear, simple language. This poem's introspective free verse style was pretty common by the mid-1960s, a time when many writers had turned away from strict meters and rhyme schemes in favor of looser, more stream-of-consciousness styles. MacCaig's poetry, like that of many authors in the mid-to-late 20th century, might also fall under the category of post-modernism, a movement that often challenged the nature of power and language in society.

MacCaig was hardly the first poet to bristle at humanity's technological progress. Centuries before this poem was written, for example, the Romantic poets railed against the urbanization of society following the Industrial Revolution (see: "London, 1802"). And in the wake of World War I, a war whose technology caused death and destruction on an unprecedented scale, modernist poets like T.S. Eliot grew deeply disillusioned with humanity itself (see: "The Waste Land").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1960s were a time of intense technological optimism. New York City, where this poem is set, was considered one of the most advanced cities in the world and a pillar of modern civilization. The Empire State Building was the tallest free-standing building on Earth at the time and a testament to humanity's technological prowess. Pan American World Airlines, the namesake of the "PanAm skyscraper" that the speaker mentions in line 5, was a major international airline. This was also the era of the "Space Race"—the decades-long battle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to create better aerospace capabilities.

However, massive social and political upheaval was taking place right alongside all this technological advancement. This was the era of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, for example, and a time when millions questioned and openly protested established social structures and hierarchies.

MacCaig's poem also alludes to the U.S.'s violent and racist history of westward expansion. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, white pioneers sought to head further west and tame the American frontier. This push resulted in frequent conflicts with the native peoples already living in this region. The U.S. government also attempted to "civilize" American Indians through policies of forced assimilation into white society and authorized their direct removal from their ancestral lands. In the end, white westward expansion caused the utter devastation of indigenous peoples and their ways of life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "The Enduring Appeal of Norman MacCaig" — Read an article about Norman MacCaig's poetic legacy. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/the_enduring_appeal_of_norman_maccaig.shtml)
- "When Native Americans Were Slaughtered in the Name of 'Civilization'" — An article from History.com about clashes between white settlers and native peoples on the American frontier. (https://www.history.com/news/native-americans-genocide-united-states)
- The American Frontier — Learn more about the history of westward expansionism in the U.S. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-frontier)
- The Empire State Building — Check out the official website of the famous New York City landmark. (https://www.esbnyc.com/)
- Norman MacCaig's Life and Work — Learn more about Norman MacCaig via the Scottish Poetry Library. (https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/norman-maccaig/)

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