Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Crossover Short Story Collection

National 5 and Higher English:

Helen McClory's 'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night'

Table of Contents

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 the Crossover Short Story Collection for National 5 and Higher. Each guide provides contextual information on the story 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, narrative structure and literary analysis.

'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' was written by Helen McClory. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the author, representatives at Jenny Brown and Associates, and the publisher – 404Ink, under a license with the SQA. Teaching resource written by Gina Lyle and Corey Gibson. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Pip Osmond-Williams, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Story overview

'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' is a short story narrated by an unnamed protagonist who lives a lonely life in a flat above a Tesco Metro. At night, they begin to hear a voice speaking in another language, and eventually a figure appears in their mirror: a man from the past. He speaks Scots and Latin, which the narrator records and later translates. The man reveals he is the last survivor of a plague in his village, and details how he lives there alone after this loss. Neither can push through the mirror to reach the other, and eventually the image in the mirror fades. The narrator reflects on their interaction, hoping that they were good company for someone who had been alone for so long.

Author background

Helen McClory is a writer based in Edinburgh. She achieved a PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow in 2010. She primarily writes prose fiction: her novels include *Flesh of the Peach* (2017, Freight Books) and *Bitterhall* (2021, Polygon), and her first short fiction collection *On the Edges of Vision* (2015, 404 Ink) won the Saltire First Book Award. Other collections include *Mayhem & Death* (2018, 404 Ink), and *The Goldblum Variations* (2017, 404 Ink), a book of flash stories about Jeff Goldblum. McClory supports other writers through her work running the Write Toscana retreat in Tuscany.

Publication details

'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' appears in McClory's *Mayhem & Death*, a collection which features thirty-eight short stories which vary in length from very short flash fiction to novella-length.

The stories are largely dark, concerned with violence, grief, animal attacks, and loneliness. Key images from each story are illustrated in black and white and displayed opposite from each story's first page. 'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' is presented with the opposite image: a starry sky (reproduced here by permission of author and publisher).

Online resources

McClory manages a blog, where she regularly posts: https://schietree.wordpress.com/

This site also offers a list of her writing available to read online and reviews of her work.

The version of 'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' printed here and published on the SQA website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards. (The story itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night'

by Helen McClory

I don't know why it did. I live in a new-build house above a Tesco Metro. This part of town seems to be historyless; I think before they built the flats there was an auto garage and before that I don't know, maybe something brownfield. But the voice that spoke to me was from someone from years and years in the past – I guessed, because I didn't fully understand it. I read a bit of Chaucer in school, and it reminded me of that, a little bit gibberish and some I could get. The voice had a Scottish character to it, though not like any dialect I could pick out. On the first night and for two nights after it was just a voice.

I went to bed at the normal time for me, which is about ten, and took my phone into bed and scrolled through the news and some football sites I like and Twitter until I was too tired to read straight, and then listened to a podcast about a crime and then one about food, to calm me down.

I like to be cosy with all the blankets around me, especially my feet, because I have a terrible fear that something will come and drag me by the ankles if I leave them exposed. This and the mirrored sliding doors of my built-in wardrobe are two things which unsettle me when I'm trying to sleep. I never liked the empty space of the mirrors taking up so much of my room, even before this happened. Now I can't stop thinking of them, everything a mirror is, and everything it isn't. I am trying to be honest here. I'm not a brave type.

I had just put down my phone and got into the position I find comfy in bed – left-hand side, curled up, pillow against my stomach – when the voice said – something. Garbled old language coming across as distance. I held my mouth shut so I wouldn't yell, but of course I knew it could have come from anywhere, that voice, the likely culprit being my phone, which I might have left in the bed and rolled over, setting off some video. I put the light on and found my phone – it was on silent. But the voice had

also stopped. I didn't think anything too much of it; I had lots of reasons to soothe myself with. If not the phone, then the downstairs or next door neighbour's TV echoing through the walls as they watched some documentary about the ancient past.

After a while of thinking, I slept, and then woke up. I went about my day fine enough; I had a meeting with my boss, but it was okay. He doesn't think much of me – he doesn't hate me either, since I do what needs doing and I don't complain. If I don't join in with workplace bonding, chatting about the telly and politics and that, then that's all he can hold against me, and it's not enough to make him want to let me go, I tell myself.

I went home at the usual time and tried to wait out the usual unpleasant feelings that I get from meetings with my boss. I just ate toast for dinner. Sometimes toast is the limit. I went to bed and decided to read, but I got distracted from my book and picked up my phone and looked at Tinder, but only because I wanted to look at some faces, not to make any decisions.

I went to sleep, and this time the voice woke me up, clearer and closer. I should say it was a man's voice, slightly gruff and raspy, like he smoked, but I'm pretty sure the time he's supposed to be from they didn't have tobacco. That was Francis Drake. Tobacco and the potato.

The voice didn't sound urgent, I thought. But you can't always read tone in a voice that you don't expect, coming out of nowhere in the middle of the night, and barely in your language. I checked my phone, I turned all the lights in the place on. There was nothing. The voice continued for a while, so I decided with a bit of effort it was either the neighbours or maybe, maybe a spy, whose equipment had malfunctioned and now their bug in my place was throwing back the sound of him talking while reading out a very old story in old time Scots, because he was bored. I quite liked that idea, and wished him well, that spy, if he was so low down on the list of spy-employees that his job was spying on me.

Eventually I slept. When I woke up, it had decided to become Autumn overnight. I don't like Autumn because it does the usual and makes me a bit sad without specific reasons, just when I'm trying my best.

When it comes I know the year is getting old, and soon it will be over, another year, and I don't have any particular thoughts about that, except I feel vaguely anxious. As if that's not enough, the leaves that get everywhere make me think of slipping and hurting myself on the leafy ground and go unseen, because everyone else is indoors, safe, with their curtains closed against the darkness, which has swallowed me up, and after a while, even the streetlights go out because in my imagination they are activated

by motion, and then I just lie there. But I like to imagine I'd be brave while lying there, if I am not knocked out.

The rain threatened all day but never came, which is just typical of Autumn. I walked home catching up with my phone but stepping very carefully between the leaves, because there's no point being careless, if you have the energy to be careful. You have to take care of yourself. The clouds looked heavy and did nothing with their rain, while the leaves hung on the city trees by their edges. It was like they were waiting until night came properly down before letting go and making the pavement even more treacherous, but beautiful too, I suppose, in their jaggy layers. There's always something beautiful going on, which I should try to notice and remember.

This time the voice came while I was eating my dinner and watching a Let's Play of a kingdom-building game. I knew the voice wasn't from that, because I'd heard all the sounds of that game, which were mostly upbeat bleeps, and the voice of the let's player, which was Canadian and silly.

The voice, the strange old voice, spoke to me this time with a bit more neediness, I think, and it kept on going. But I didn't say anything, because what could I say? Saying something would be acknowledging it was there, and I was trying to believe it was just a fluke of sounds from harmless places, the thin walls, some devices malfunctioning. Though how would I know? The voice rambled on, raspy and dry and a little bit wobbly. I could hear some emotion other than need – like he needed to know I was listening, but also that the story he was telling was something that was painful to him and important. I could have got more of what he was saying if I listened closer, but I didn't want to do that.

What could I do? I went to bed and put my headphones in. Eventually the voice, which never got any louder, started to hesitate, and then stopped.

When I woke up the next day I remembered it was a Saturday. I was nervous about staying all day in my flat, with that voice potentially coming back at any moment, but I also didn't want to change my plans for what was possibly a kind of hallucination on my part, so I stayed in and made French toast. Anyway it was raining, properly lashing it down. Like God was angry with pavements and streets and was trying to pummel them back to muddy ground again. I ate the French toast with ketchup and looked at my phone at a few videos of *Hearthstone*, which I you don't know is a card-based computer game that's free-to-play and has a bit of a look of pinball machine to it, only with magical cards.

I had just had a shower – it was four pm – when I walked into my bedroom and saw a man in the mirrored sliding door. He was looking away. You do not know how disconcerting it is to see the back of someone's head in the mirror, right where you are

standing. You can never see the back of your own head facing a mirror like that, and to see someone else's is sickening. I think I shouted, because the man in the mirror seemed to flinch, and then turned around.

My first and strongest thought was that I should run away, but I just stood and stared at the man there. He had a thin, skeletal face, but ruddy in the cheeks, like someone who had worked outside a lot and was healthy, but didn't have much food to eat. He had thin, fine hair that lay on the top of his head in sharp points. It was the kind of grey hair people are born with, I don't know a name for the colour, but it's common enough. I remember his fingers going up to his head to straighten the hair in place as he looked at me. He had deeply set eyes pale back there in his skull. He moved like no one else I've ever seen. It must have been his lack of body fat. He sort of slink-stepped closer to the glass and put his hand up to that. There was sky, grey clouds behind him like he was standing on the top of a hill. I started to shudder as I was breathing, quick and shallow breaths, and my whole body trembling.

"Nolit timere," he said. He said it a few times over the course of the night, and later I looked it up. It means do not be afraid, in Latin. But I nearly started wailing. Maybe I did, don't remember. Maybe I barked like a dog. I had known before he spoke that he was the owner of the voice I had been hearing, but it didn't make it any less terrifying and upsetting to have that proved true. I was either mad, or I wasn't mad, and both options were fucking awful. I backed out of the room and slammed the door behind me.

I went to the kitchen and downed a glass of very acidic orange juice and splashed water on my face. I went to the toilet and had a long piss and washed up and brushed my teeth. I went back to the room, because it was my room, and I hoped he would have gone, but of course he was still there, staring out at me from his thin face that had the cheek to look concerned. Eventually, since nothing was going to stop any of this from happening to me, I got together myself and put on some kind of unified front.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What's your name?"

I pointed to my chest, and said my name. "And you?"

"Name? Nomen?" he said. I nodded.

He said his name, but it was an old one, and I didn't know it, and I couldn't repeat it if I tried. Mal-something. Not Malcolm, but close. I might know it again if someone said it out loud, but I don't think that's likely to happen. I'm giving this as kind of evidence that I didn't hallucinate him, because if I had, I probably would have made up a name I could remember. Even my subconscious would have. I'm not that creative, and I know a lot of names, generally, from all kinds of eras of history, and I've read a lot

of fantasy books. But I didn't know his, so I didn't really catch it and I don't remember it now.

"What are you doing in my mirror?" I asked. He looked around and held out his hands. I noticed the fingers were long, and I thought that was surprising because if he was from some time way back in the dark ages he probably would be considered very tall. He was even a little taller than I am, and I'm average for nowadays, with all the food and vitamins and modern medicines we have.

"Okay," I tried. "What are you doing here? Why do you keep coming here? Do you know where you are? You're in my house. In my bedroom." I didn't want to say, that's pretty rude of you, but my tone probably implied it. I put my hands on my hips, but took them off right away. Just because he was in my house didn't mean I had to be a knob. And technically he wasn't in my bedroom; he was in the mirror, or the place that could be seen through my mirror, with heavy clouds moving quickly, like the ridge of a hill. He took a small shuddery breath in, just like one of my breaths from earlier, and began his story. It was in a mixture of Scots and some Latin, and I made him stop a bit so I could press record on my phone. Later, I played it back and worked out what he had said, which took a long time.

He told me he was the only man left alive in his village. He tried to describe where his village was, but I didn't recognise it from the names of the hills he mentioned. He did say it was half a day's walk from the sea, though that doesn't cut much out in this country. You're never more than about forty miles from the sea in Scotland. A plague had come and made everyone ill but him, over a period of a few weeks. And then everyone started dying. He talked a lot about bodies, how they had stacked up everywhere in the huts and he couldn't keep up with burying, but he had tried his best. He mentioned God a lot. That was a word I recognised when he spoke, Deus. I nodded when I heard it; he said it with a lot of pain.

He said he went into every house and that death was inside each one, standing over the bodies with her long soft wings. Yes, just like that he said it, and I shivered when I worked out the translation. He talked about the grain rotting in the field; he had been trying to get it all in for the winter. He said his hands bled from effort, and he hoped that I would believe him that they bled from effort, and not think he had just given himself an easy life. He mentioned a flour mill, and said he had gone there with the grain piled up on the laird's horse – I don't know who the laird was – but there was no one attending the mill, and he had tried to grind the grain but didn't do a good job of it. So he went home. And he ran out of hope, he said, and had no one left to bury but everyone left to cry for, and nothing much else to do with his days except feel his heart's pains and put what food away for the winter that he could.

He had decided to live in the laird's house because it was off from the village and had had the least visits from death, even though, he said, it was a sin to take the laird's place. He sighed and shuddered a lot here, so clearly it worried him, what he'd done – he wanted to reassure me he didn't have any ideas about his station in life suddenly being raised above what was natural.

He said he had learned to read from a brief stay with some monks as a boy. Here I was a bit confused, something to do with almost becoming a young monk but his father needed him and pulled him out, and it had caused some bother, but he was his father's only child, or had become his only child, so they let him go. It had broken his heart, because he had loved learning, and the monastery life was not supposed to be something you just left. He felt it was his sins that had led him out of the path to knowledge, he said, though he was just a boy then and his sins were only small ones. His father had had to pay something for taking him out, sheaves of oats, I think, for some years. He had wondered if leaving the monastery was the reason why the angel of death hadn't come for him, if it was a kind of curse, and he wanted to find out.

In the laird's house there was a library of books, and he spent some time reading, which he had never before been able to do. He built a fire up very high but made sure to replace the wood every day, in case someone came and threw him out. But no one came. He stayed up late in the evenings and read lots of the laird's Latin books, and there was a Greek one that interested him but gave him some trouble until he found an alphabet for it in the children's room upstairs. The children were dead too, he said. Everyone was dead.

So in the empty house he taught himself Greek and how to read better. He wanted me to know he used his time well and wasn't idle. He found nothing that said it was a sin to be taken out of a monastery so he thought perhaps when the plague would pass and people returned he might make another attempt to enter the monastery with his new learning and make his life a kind of careful atonement for his sins, his other sins in life, though he couldn't think exactly what they were, perhaps sins of the mind. He was someone who thought a lot, it seemed. But then, he'd had lots of time to think about things.

I don't think I would have known what to do in that situation, if everybody around me died. Possibly I wouldn't know until I needed to go to the shops for something. I'd be fine until the food in the shops spoiled, and the electricity went out, then I'd be in some trouble. But this man kept himself going, he said, for a whole turn of the seasons, a year. All alone, with nobody coming. Could I have gone on too, like he had? Realistically I would have just died of starvation quite quickly because I can't support myself in any practical way.

When I was writing out what he'd said, after the mirror had gone back to normal, I wished I could have asked him questions in real time.

I wanted to know if he had a wife, and I wasn't clear on how a peasant like him with no more than a few months' education could teach himself a whole other language. I wanted to tell him I was impressed by that. I wanted to tell him too that I was sorry he was so alone in his world.

Loneliness is a terrible thing, wherever you are. I think it's a stronger force than love, because it's a kind of love for everyone that is never returned. In that way, maybe it's not so terrible but a kind of burning power that might give you something back, if you have it in you, beaming out. I'm not the kind of person to run away with conspiracy theories, but I can't help but feel like the reason he could see me, across the years like that, and really improbably, was because of the force of his loneliness, making a portal or something.

I don't know why he should connect with me out of anyone in existence ever. I'm not very interesting, or powerful, in my day-to-day life or in my imagination. I'd be the last to get picked for a special mission to save the earth and the first to die in a magical world, a random casualty trampled by a beast or army, I know that much. But I keep going, and now I keep going knowing that he came to me. Maybe everyone has a visit from a lonely person from the past through their mirrors; I wouldn't be surprised. I'd like the world a bit better if that was the case.

After he had finished speaking, I went up to the mirror and tried to push through it, but that didn't work. He also tried but gave up and shook his head. Then I remembered it was a good thing I couldn't go in, because I'd read that the microbes I have on my skin have evolved a lot since the microbes on his skin were in existence, meaning that I might be a source of disease myself, if I came into contact with him, and probably the other way round too. But who knows how it works; maybe the mirror would have cleansed me or covered me with a protective layer like a spacesuit. But I couldn't get through and he couldn't get through. I sat down, and he did too. The wind on his side ruffled his fine hair and he pulled his woollen clothing close around him. I knew he couldn't sit there forever. I thought I could.

I had such a funny feeling in my heart, even then, when I hadn't known everything he'd said. I nursed that feeling, and I looked at him for a long time saying nothing. He looked back at me. I wondered what he was looking into. Mirrors weren't very common in the dark ages, or whenever there were peasants around. I guessed maybe it was the glass window of the laird's house. I went and got a piece of printer paper and scribbled out my idea of his set up. A big house with him sitting on the grass outside it. He shook

his head, and made some shapes in the air, jagged. I think he meant the glass was in a big piece lying against something, a tree maybe.

I wondered how he got the idea to look in the glass. I wondered a lot of things, just sitting there, looking at him, with my bed behind me. I wanted to invite him through into my house and put him up. He could have the bed. I'd have done anything for him. That face of his, it was a good face, honest and thin. Lots of cares written on it.

I stared for so long, sometimes smiling and raising my hand, like an idiot really, but I didn't know what else to do.

Eventually it started getting dark on his side. I turned and saw from my window it was getting dark too. The light faded, and he faded, and I couldn't see him anymore. I cried out, just something pointless like 'hey! I can't see you anymore!' And he said something back, calmer than me. I didn't get a chance to record it. I don't usually get gut feelings about much, but I felt certain I wouldn't see him again, or at least not for a long time. His face comes back to me, in waves, I see it, kind, and wanting, getting. I wonder what he thought about my face, if he liked it. It must have looked strange to him, soft and unfamiliar, but I hope he thinks for all that, that it was a good face too, that my company was good for him, after so much time alone.

Full analysis

Unnamed Narrator

McClory chooses not to name or gender the narrator for this story, which creates a sense of their potential to be anyone. Perhaps they represent a common type of person, one whose lifestyle is shared with lots of people.

With a first-person narrative style, questions can be raised about the reliability of the narration: have events truly taken place as they describe from their perspective? This is something the narrator discusses when talking about the man in the mirror's name (lines 129–133). They did not understand or remember his full name, only that it started with 'Mal', and they believe that this detail shows that they could not have imagined the experience, or they would have created something more complete and more memorable.

Lines 1–10

There is a lot of information delivered in this opening paragraph. Notice that the title runs right into the story itself. The bare facts of the story are accounted for in that title and the first sentence: a voice spoke to our narrator, and our narrator does not know why. This collapsing of the title into the story introduces a narrative that is hesitant and exploratory – there is not a stand-alone, and definitive title to offer, because that would suggest a perspective that was much more confident and assured.

After that, we are given some more detail on where and when this event occurred. The history of the area seems to be hidden, unknown, or even absent entirely. The unnamed narrator only knows that there was a garage there before, but before that is a mystery. 'Brownfield' refers to land that has been developed before, but that lies empty now. It has specific definitions for councils and town-planners, but it evokes ideas about land abandoned or otherwise tainted by its previous use – especially industrial use. This part of town, which seems 'historyless', nevertheless is the site for this visitation from a voice from the distant past.

Again, the narrator emphasises how much they do not know or understand. They have read a little Geoffrey Chaucer, a celebrated medieval poet who wrote in an older form of English called Middle English. To the modern ear, Middle English can sound at once alien and familiar: ‘a little bit gibberish and some I could get’. This voice reminds our narrator of that language, though it has a ‘Scottish character’, even if this cannot be placed more precisely.

Lines 11–31

Our narrator describes in some detail their daily routine leading up to this visitation, though there are still a lot of basics that we do not get to learn about them: their name or their gender, for instance.

We learn of their need to feel ‘calm’ and ‘cosy’ and how various apps and activities on their phone are used to try and meet these needs. These all relate to aspects of contemporary popular culture: football, social media, true crime podcasts, food and recipes. We also learn, directly and indirectly, of some of our narrator’s anxieties and fears: monsters under the bed or an equivalent (‘something will come and drag me by the ankles’); and the eeriness that comes from the mirror-fronted wardrobe making the space of the bedroom feel bigger, and emptier, than it is. These feelings of exposure and vulnerability might be relevant in foreshadowing the rest of the story. Certainly, the preoccupation with the mirror gives us a clue as to what is coming. The narrator has specific routines and preferred positions in bed to help ward off these feelings (‘left-hand side, curled up, pillow against my stomach’).

We also see a direct intervention of the narrator’s voice here – they seem to speak directly to us as readers, in assuring us that they are ‘trying to be honest’ about their lack of bravery.

When the voice first announces itself, it is ‘garbled’ and unclear. Our narrator tries to explain the event away – using their phone, or the noise of their neighbours’ TV. When this is explained as ‘I had lots of reasons to sooth myself with’, we get some insight into how this person understands their own fears and how they work to try and moderate them: coming up with lots of ‘reasons’, needing many possible explanations, but being careful not to settle on one – presumably because that might be too easy to disprove or

undermine, and then they would have to face the possibility that this 'voice' does not have an everyday explanation. That phones and TVs are at the heart of these attempted explanations also says something about how we might use such media and devices to distract or reassure ourselves in modern life.

Lines 32–55

Our narrator thinks, sleeps, wakes, and goes to work. They worry about what their boss thinks of them and they reassure themselves about their failings not being serious enough to get them fired. They refer without any specifics to the 'unpleasant feelings' they get from having to meet with their boss. They do not engage in the social side of the workplace, and we do not learn anything about the nature of the work itself. It does not seem to carry much meaning for them. Still sticking to their routine, they go home 'at the usual time' after having gone to bed the previous night 'at the normal time'.

The narrator's phone remains a focal point. Having skipped dinner in favour of toast, they skip reading their book in favour of looking at the dating-app, Tinder. But they are not looking for a romantic connection – they just want to 'look at some faces'. We are learning more about how the narrator lives through and manages their loneliness.

The voice is described: it seems to belong to a man and to a smoker. But the narrator recalls another little bit of historical information, that tobacco did not arrive on this island until 1586 with the explorer and privateer, Sir Francis Drake. And the voice seemed to belong to an earlier period. With details like this, we are beginning to see how much history lies between the world of the voice and the one our narrator inhabits – we can start to imagine the extent of this historical distance. This is before tobacco, before the potato even.

The narrator speculates on the tone of the voice, but soon considers how difficult that is to understand in these circumstances: with the strangeness and suddenness of the event, and the language, providing obstacles to understanding even at the level of 'tone'. The narrator turns to an even less plausible explanation – a faulty bit of surveillance equipment belonging to a 'spy' who has decided to read an old Scots story aloud out of boredom. While we know that we live in an age of mass surveillance, by states and corporations alike, this still seems like a stretch. Our narrator has to put effort into this imagined

explanation. They conjure up the figure of a spy so junior, so unappreciated, that they are tasked with the case of the unremarkable narrator. We might consider whether, by imagining this, they are feeling sorry for themselves or even imagining themselves a friend of sorts – someone whose job it is to keep an eye on them.

Lines 56–98

Waking the following morning our narrator discovers that Autumn has begun. The season unsettles them in ways that seem difficult to explain ('a bit sad without specific reasons'; 'I don't have any particular thoughts about that, except I feel vaguely anxious'). The suddenness of Autumn's arrival is another example of how the story experiments with time and history, its cycles and seasons and routines.

These reflections on Autumn and wet leaves on the streets prompt more thoughts about risk and exposure, about falling and getting hurt, and going unnoticed and neglected. Under these conditions, facing these everyday dangers, the narrator concludes: 'You have to take care of yourself'. But we have access to their thoughts and feelings, their efforts at self-reliance and self-care. And we can see the limitations of these efforts.

These attempts to manage the journey through life, and the compression of historical time, is also subtly signalled in the 'Let's Play' video our narrator is watching whilst eating dinner. It is a voiced-over walk-through of a 'kingdom-building' real-time strategy video game, which will take in whole swathes of history and give the player an almost god-like overview that is not accessible to actual people, who are swept up in history and subject to it.

This is the setting for the next interjection of the 'voice'. It becomes more insistent, our narrator seems able to read more into it – about its tone and the feeling behind it, though they continue to try to ignore it. They feel unable to do anything *but* ignore the voice, because to do otherwise would be to finally disavow all of the imagined explanations they are trying to sustain.

Similarly, the following day, the narrator is trapped in another dilemma: they want to go out, to avoid having to deal with the voice; but to do that would mean changing plans for staying in all day for something they are trying to pretend is not there. The rain comes down

so heavily it seems to want to return the paved streets to mud. This is a nod to the idea of undoing history and the built-up environment in which our narrator lives, perhaps returning it to the world of the voice. The narrator turns again to a video walk-through of a game – to watching someone else take control and participate in something, rather than doing so themselves. This time, it is the online card-based game, *Hearthstone*, which you can look up online. It is part of the *Warcraft* franchise and features representations of a fantastical medieval setting, complete with magic, and lore, and monsters. This is yet another example of a connection with a kind of history, though one diluted and distanced by popular culture and technology ('a bit of a look of pinball machine to it'). It is history as an aesthetic, as a style or appearance, rather than anything more.

Lines 99–155

The circumstances of the narrator's first encounter with the image of the figure in the wardrobe mirror are quite particular ('I had just had a shower – it was four pm'). The vision in the mirror is 'sickening' because it should be impossible. The fright this produces makes them feel the need to run, but they only stand and stare. The description of the figure that follows is also quite detailed. This marks a shift from a lot of imprecise feelings and impressions in the story up to this point. It is worth thinking about what is described and what is not.

Lots of the features of the man are described in terms that make him sound quite alien. He is full of contradictions to the modern eye. He is 'skeletal' but also 'ruddy in the cheeks', so he appears both close to death and to possess a kind of vigour or health. He has the 'kind of grey hair people are born with', and though the colour is 'common enough' it also seems to be another example of a kind of disordered experience of time: having grey hair from birth. Greying hair is a natural part of ageing, but it can also be influenced by genetic inheritances, or else certain vitamin deficiencies, malnutrition, or stress. These kinds of details encourage us to wonder with the narrator about such causes and circumstances. The figure has qualities that we can admire, and some that we can pity.

Even the man's movements are strange to our narrator, who speculates that this is because of his prolonged hunger, his 'lack of body fat'. There seems to be an implication that this kind of bodily movement is not familiar to the narrator in their own time and place.

Seeing our narrator's fear, the man reassures them in Latin: 'Nolit timere'. We learn that this means 'do not be afraid', but also that the narrator had look this up, later, after the fact. There is a delay in understanding here, their communication follows a broken rhythm. This is likely to limit how much they can learn about one another.

The narrator's fear is such that language fails them entirely; they might even have 'barked like a dog' for all they remember. All of the possible explanations they had been shoring up now fall away and all that is left is that they are either 'mad' or 'not mad'. Neither eventuality is reassuring – to have lost their sanity, or else to be experiencing something supernatural and inexplicable.

The narrator closes the door on the bedroom and returns to a daily routine that is characterised by modern conveniences that would be entirely outside of the experience of the man in the mirror: they drink the juice of a tropical fruit, they use running water and indoor plumbing, and they brush their teeth with all of the 'usual' apparatus. Returning, they have a slightly aggravated response to the visitor's seeming concern for them in their fear – the 'cheek' of this look. The complicating factors in their perspectives on one another are being laid out here: the self-regard or lack of it, the concern, the pity, and the wonder.

The direct conversation that follows sees an exchange of names. Though we still do not learn the narrator's name, we partially pick up the figure's: 'Mal-something'. The name captures this half-way recognition that has been explored throughout. The narrator would recognise it if they heard it again, though they are quite sure that will not happen. The half-received name is also turned to their own ends, as evidence that the whole episode is not a figment of their imagination. Their knowledge of history and of fantasy literature would have provided them with plenty of feasible, whole names to choose from had they made the whole thing up.

The other questions that follow, about what Mal-something is doing in the bedroom, in the mirror, come across as interrogative. Our narrator quickly realises this and adjusts their self-presentation so as not to 'be a knob' about it. They seem to be gradually coming to realise the strange combination of proximity and distance that stands between them: things that they seem to recognise in one another, and things that are utterly alien and that increase the distance between them.

The shiver and the quick breath of Mal-something (lines 152-153) is compared to that of the narrator just a few moments earlier in their initial fear at the encounter (lines 114-115). This is a literal reflection. Similarly, this moment, in which Mal-something's story begins, echoes the beginning of the narrator's own story, this story. Again, we are reminded of the fractured rhythm of their conversation, as our narrator has to record the story – delivered in 'a mixture of Scots and some Latin' – to painstakingly transcribe and translate it, later.

Lines 156–207

His story is mostly relayed very directly, though with asides about the limitations of our narrator's understanding – the parts they could not understand, the parts that demanded further research.

The fact that the location cannot be narrowed down, and that 'You're never more than about forty miles from the sea in Scotland', means that it could be anywhere in Scotland, and so it might be read as relevant to the nation entire.

The plague and the mass death could therefore be part of the history of any place in the country, though it is not perhaps remembered, or memorialised. For Mal-something, this is understood in both religious terms (the mentions of 'God') and material terms (the bodies, the crops, his bleeding hands, and the coming winter). The description of death 'standing over the bodies with her long soft wings' gives our narrator a shiver once they have translated it. This could be due to the fact that, when delivered by Mal-something, and from his worldview, our modern narrator does not know how to receive this description: should it be taken literally? Is it metaphorical? What does it signify about the idea of death in this place in time as opposed to their own?

We learn that Mal-something is keen to have our narrator know that he has worked hard, that he has not been lazy, and that he 'didn't have any ideas about his station in life' just because he had moved into the Laird's – or landowner's – house. This tells us, and our narrator, something about the kinds of morals and hierarchies that this society holds highly. It also shows that these ideas are so ingrained that they still carry force even for the sole survivor of that society or community: without any immediate threat of enforcement by others.

Here we get more backstory for Mal-something, though the details are unclear for our narrator. This backstory explains his literacy despite his humble standing in society, as a peasant. He was briefly educated by monks, but even this relationship is characterised by both high ideals (knowledge as a virtue) and material relations (the debt of his family to the monastery, paid in oats). The strangeness of the 'angel of death' is pressed upon the modern narrator and their modern audience again, when Mal-something suggests that he might have been spared death as a *curse* for his failure to commit to the monastic life.

He studies the Laird's books to try to understand the meaning of his survival. He is sure of the fact of his sins, but he cannot be specific about them. This, again, echoes the kinds of over-thinking our narrator has revealed of themselves earlier in the story ('He was someone who thought a lot, it seemed.').

Lines 208–268

The narrator reflects on how they would fare in Mal-something's position 'if everybody around me died'. They consider their relative lack of 'practical' skills for survival.

Next, we get a rare, direct indication that this visitation will end 'after the mirror had gone back to normal', and we learn of the narrator's regret that they could not talk 'in real time' without the need for recording, transcription, and translation. The regret extends to the desire to know more about Mal-something's family, to tell him how his tenacity and determination impressed the narrator, and to express sympathy with his loneliness.

This central theme of the story is finally named and discussed directly here: loneliness. One key quote explains: 'it's a stronger force than love, because it's a kind of love for everyone that is never returned'. Although it is 'terrible', loneliness, then, has a kind of 'power' in it. Maybe even a power sufficient to open a 'portal' across time. The narrator seems almost embarrassed by this revelation, suggesting that it might be equivalent to a 'conspiracy theory'. One explanation for the popular force of 'conspiracy theories' is that they satisfy our need to have the world make a kind of sense, even if in a scary or threatening way: at least people's suffering would then be explicable. Here, we can see our narrator reaching for a profound explanation that also satisfies a need in themselves.

With further reflection on their own involvement in this visitation, the narrator considers how unremarkable they believe themselves to be; how unlikely a hero they might be in a Sci-Fi or Fantasy adventure. However, the knowledge that this historical figure chose to visit them seems to bring them some comfort.

We then return to Mal-something and the end of his story. Both try to reach through the mirror towards one another but are unable to. The narrator speculates on the mechanics of this portal – and worries that even if they could reach one another, their worlds are so different even down to the microbial level, that they might make one another sick. This is another detail that emphasises the distance between them, but what follows brings yet another example of how that distance can be overcome: the encounter seems to produce profound feelings of connection or mutual recognition that they want to hold on to ('a funny feeling in my heart'; 'I nursed that feeling').

The narrator tries to understand what kind of reflective surface Mal-something is looking into and how he came to look into it in the first place. They wonder 'a lot of things'; they want to invite him into their home; and they study his face – reading meanings into it ('a good face, honest and thin. Lots of care written on it.').

We learn that they sit looking at one another like this for a long time. The limits of this portal seem to suggest that history is ever-present, though we cannot step through into it, to know it first-hand. We are left only with speculations, and ideas that mostly reflect something of ourselves.

It gets dark on both sides of the mirror, and they call out to one another. Our narrator accounts for the memories they carry of this encounter. They confirm that they do not have strong instincts towards things often, but that they did feel sure they would not see Mal-something again ('I don't usually get gut feelings about much, but I felt certain…'). This surety seems to show a change in our narrator. The story closes with their trying to imagine what Mal-something thought of them, hoping that they were able to bring him some comfort. In this way, the encounter concludes with the narrator having come to find something valuable in themselves – something that needed this strange meeting to bring it out. If loneliness is the key theme, the key motif is the mirror. And the story ends with a potentially healthier form of self-reflection.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- Who is our narrator in this story? What can you discern about them?
- List any odd features or unfamiliar words or concepts that come up in the story. How might you understand them?
- Where and when do these events take place?
- What actually happens in the story? Is this visitation real, or imagined? And does it matter either way?
- How do you think you would respond to an experience like this?

Techniques

- How would you describe the writing style?
- What genre do you think this story belongs to? Is it a ghost story? A horror?
- Which elements of the story encourage you to believe the narrator's account? Which elements encourage you to disbelieve?
- How does the fact that we do not know the narrator's name or gender effect our reading of the story? Is this important?
- How is the narrator's loneliness and isolation represented in the story?
- How does our narrator translate and interpret the live of the figure in the mirror?
- How does the detailed setting of the story contribute to its effects? (think of the flat, the season, the weather, the workplace, the world Mal-something lives in).

Themes

- Is there a message in this story? If so, what is it?
- How powerful an emotion is loneliness? What kind of ideas and actions can it produce?
- We might understand this as a story about how much we can and cannot know about our history. What can we know? What can we not know?
- How does the narrator's modern loneliness compare with that of the visitor from the past?
- How does Mal-something deal with the loss of his community? By comparison, does the narrator have a community to lose?

- How might it be significant that these figures meet in the mirror? What do we see when we look in the mirror? Is it something we have to actively read or interpret? Does it tell the whole truth or is it just superficial?
- How does modern technology help our narrator to connect with others? How does it hinder?
- How different would this interaction have been if these figures could have communicated in real-time?

Practice Questions

Note that 2- and 4-mark exam questions will refer to specific excerpts. The practice questions below have been written with the whole story in mind. They can be applied to a given excerpt or to the whole story.

National 5 Questions

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain what we learn about the narrator's everyday life. (4 marks)

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the narrator's fears are revealed. (4 marks)

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer creates a tender atmosphere. (4 marks)

By referring to this story and to at least one other from the short story collection, show how the writers present difficulties in communication. (8 marks)

Higher Questions

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the writer's use of language provides possible explanations for this strange encounter. (4 marks)

Analyse how language is used to convey the appearance of the figure in the mirror. (2 marks)

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the writer uses language to convey modern technology. (4 marks)

By referring to this story and to at least one other from the short story collection, discuss how the writers use the supernatural to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Stories that Helen McClory's 'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' might be compared with for the 8-mark question (National 5) or the 10-mark question (Higher) are:

- 'Things My Wife and I Found Hidden in Our House' by Kirsty Logan
- 'Andrina' by George Mackay Brown
- 'Death in a Nut' as told by Duncan Williamson

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.