

Norman maccaigs
assisi is an intriguing
poem in which a
contrast is used to
creat...



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From the outset MacCaig uses shocking images to create sympathy for the beggar. The first image occurs at the beginning of the first line, which induces a feeling of shock within the reader.

The beggar is described as a “dwarf”, and goes on to say his “hands [were] on backward”, which is at the end of the same line. He is also said to have “tiny twisted legs”. Perhaps the best description of the beggar is the simile on line two, in which MacCaig compares him to a “half filled sack”. The word “slumped” implies the shape of the beggar’s back is like the arch of the sack. The leaky bag of sawdust could resemble the energy and life draining from him, and could also indicate that he was physically damaged.

The common letter “S” in the alliteration of this image is onomatopoeic, and suggests the running of the sawdust. This also portrays the beggar as worthless, as sawdust isn’t valuable, and is just the leftovers of wood. These are particularly cold and cruel descriptions of someone who is in need of help. It makes the beggar seem almost un-human. MacCaig deliberately uses unfeeling descriptions to convey society’s attitude, and forces us as readers and members of society to think about how we would view the beggar. We see that the beggar is rejected by society by the use of the word “outside”.

This is cleverly placed at the beginning of the stanzas centre line. This gives it more emphasis and indicates that he is outcast from society. The descriptions of the beggar and the church are balanced around this word, showing there is a contrast between them. It creates sympathy towards the beggar, and makes the reader realise the irony in that he is outside a church,

which is meant to help him. The church is portrayed as an elaborate and rich building through the poem.

We are shown this through the details of the church, such as “ the three tiers of church”. The alliteration makes this stand out, and shows us its importance. To contrast the description of the church, directly after it we are told about social injustice in the church’s neglect of it’s duty. MacCaig ironically tells us that it was built “ in honour of St. Francis”. As the church was dedicated to a saint, you would expect it’s main purpose to be continuing the work of that particular saint.

We are then told the Saint Francis was a “ brother of the poor” indicating that he helped those who needed it most. This forces us to reflect on the position of the beggar, who was suffering outside the church, cleverly showing that the church was not continuing the work of Saint Francis and therefore if failing to fulfil it’s duty. The beggar didn’t have many things going for him. His only advantage over Saint Francis was “ not being dead yet”. This implies that he is close to death by the use of the term “ yet”, and indicates that he is desperate and pathetic.

The sympathy we feel for him is built up, through the use of very black ironic humour. As the next stanza begins we move inside the church, and the priest is introduced as being a cunning character. Emphasis is put on the words “ clever”, “ goodness”, and “ suffering”, due to he line division. Each of which has been carefully chosen to be made stand out, as they are ironic.

This shows that the paintings glorify the church, rather than continue their sole purpose of helping the poor. This is a further indication of the church’s <https://assignbuster.com/norman-maccaigs-assisi-is-an-intriguing-poem-in-which-a-contrast-is-used-to-create-an-intense-feeling-of-irony-and-sympathy/>

dereliction of duty, the suffering and neglect of the beggar, and the hypocrisy of the priest. In the third stanza an extended metaphor is used to compare the tourists, who represent society, to chickens. "Clucking contentedly" and "fluttered" are onomatopoeic terms, so it feels like we can actually hear them, and further links them to chickens. The noise could also be that of them talking, comparing this to the clucking of chickens, shows it was worthless squabble.

At this point MacCaig roundly condemns them. The word "they" is emphasised, condemning the tourists to being helpless and not thinking. This shows that they are mindless, naïve, and self-concerned. Further brutal terms are used to reinforce our sympathy for the beggar.

He is described as a "ruined temple", which brings Saint Francis and the beggar even closer together, indicating that the beggar is worthy of worship and salvation, as he has coped with harsh conditions when the people who are supposed to be helping him, are ignoring him. After these harsh terms, there is a change in tone showing MacCaig's attitude towards the beggar. He is said to have "a voice as sweet as a child's", indicating that MacCaig took the time to help him, which the beggar is grateful for emphasising the beggar's purity and innocence. This is well placed to contrast with the harsh conditions, thus enhancing the sense of innocence and vulnerability. The poem makes us feel sympathetic towards the beggar right up until the end. We are reminded of the beginning of the poem by the reference back to Saint Francis talking with birds.

At this time at the beginning we are told that the beggar doesn't have long to live, leaving us feeling helpless, as it is too late to help him, and we can't change it. Assisi is a very moving poem, which allows us to reflect upon ourselves as well as the poem at the end.