

A comparison of tennyson's the eagle and mccaig's the sparrow essay



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The immediate thing that strikes me, when comparing Tennyson's "eagle" and McCaig's "sparrow", is the great contrast in length between the two poems. In just two verses, Tennyson manages to convey the pure majesty of the eagle in its natural habitat, following the instinct that has driven it to hunt its prey like countless generations before. He very much admired the style of writing used by the Italian poets of his generation. He employed this style, known as Terza Rima, which, in Italian, means three rhymes.

McCaig, however, has used a very ordinary style of writing and four times the amount of words to evoke an image of the common but dignified sparrow. The inspiration for Tennyson's poem came from his viewing, at first hand, an eagle whilst travelling through America. His poem shows a keen sense of observation and he must have admired what he was witnessing, to be able to express so vividly what he saw. The Sparrow, which is a totally different type of composition from the Eagle, probably tells us that the poets have had very contrasting sources of inspiration.

Alfred Lord Tennyson was Poet Laureate and a great patriot. He wrote a poem for Queen Victoria in 1851. He wrote traditional rhyming poetry and was very popular and widely read in his day. When reading his poem, we get a great feeling that the Eagle is like a God. The final line confirms this by comparing the Eagle with the Greek God, Zeus, "And like a thunderbolt he falls". Earlier in the poem he used strong words, eg "clasps", which tells us he has a mighty grip. Alliteration is a device used very effectively in this poem. "He clasps the crag with crooked hands".

In my opinion, alliteration here gives a sense of strength to the first line.

Tennyson encourages us to relate to the bird by personifying the eagle. He does this by saying the bird has "hands". The Eagle is said to be at the top of the food chain and this just adds to the awe of Tennyson's subject choice, also the sea, the mountains and the very sky are portrayed to be his domain. This is demonstrated by "Close to the sun in lonely land". Ring'd with the Azure world he stands". The poem also suggests that the sea is his slave by using the phrase "The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls".

Norman Alexander McCaig worked as a school teacher from 1934 to 1970. He was a conscientious objector in the Second World War. In 1986 he was awarded the Queen's Medal for poetry. McCaig was not a traditional poet. His early poetry associated him with the "New Apocolypse" movement of J. F. Hendry and others. He was considered one of Scotland's foremost poets of the 20th Century. McCaig's Sparrow is conversational in style. The ordinary language used in this poem is appropriate because the subject is considered to be common.

Amongst some of the poetic devices he uses in this poem is repetition. This gets his point across very successfully. "To stalk solitary on lawns, to sing solitary in midnight trees, to glide solitary over gray atlantics" In verse two there are two main points to recognise. The first is his reference to other birds, by suggestion: "Peacocks stalk on lawns, Nightingales sing in the midnight trees, Albatrosses glide over the Atlantic." The second is that this is the only part of the poem that is not in conversational style.

Immediately after this, McCaig reverts to the use of slang language. Line 11: " a punch up in the gutter", which is in direct contrast to the preceding formality. This relates to us how ordinary the sparrow is considered to be. A further point to notice in verse two is that he makes use of alliteration, which adds more weight to his repetition, this is similar to Tennyson, who uses alliteration to give back bone to certain lines " Close to the sun in lonely lands". In this poem McCaig uses, much like Tennyson, personification, " He's no artist, He carries what learning he has lightly".

However, in McCaig's case, he is not trying to make the sparrow feel equal to us, he is simply helping us to relate to this bird. After he has talked of the sparrow's learning, McCaig tells us that the sparrow is " A proletarian bird", this strikes me as a way of, once again relating him to us by calling him a working class bird. McCaig's style may be simple, but in this line he shows an advanced use of vocabulary, and an important point to notice in this is that every time he changes to a formal style, he then quite simply rejects the formality by using contradictory words.

In the final verse of this poem, McCaig leads us to believe that Winter creeps up slowly and silently upon us, by using the idiom " But when the winter soft-shoes in". He then goes on to compare the simple sparrow with the less robust species such as peacocks and swans " ballet dancers", nightingales " musicians" and house martins " architects", who unlike the sparrow are caught unaware of winter's severity. The conclusion of this poem is summed up by a hugely important metaphor " watch him happily flying on the O-levels and A-levels of the air". This leaves us in no doubt that the sparrow is a survivor.

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Having studied both these poems, I have noticed that there are several connections between them. The first very obvious connection is that of the subject matter, this is that they are both about birds. The second connection is that although the poems portray very different pictures, the writers have used the same poetic devices. As I have outlined with earlier examples, both alliteration and personification have been used by both poets. The eagle and the sparrow are both strong birds in their own fields. This comes across by the poets' use of descriptive vocabulary throughout.

During my studies of these poems, I have become more and more impressed with the brilliance of Tennyson's descriptive powers. After six short lines, I have a vivid image of the eagle, ready to dive, " He watches from his mountain walls". However, due to McCaig's story of the poor sparrow, I feel this demonstrates that peoples' problems are not always as bad as they think. As an avid " twitcher", I thought I knew quite a lot about eagles and sparrows, but looking through the eyes of two eminent poets, I now know that I have a lot more to learn.