

Scottish Poetry Library

ASSISI by Norman McCaig

Resource by Jane Cooper.

Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. If you see someone begging in a public place, what do you feel?
2. And, if you see someone begging in a public place, what do you do? Give them money? Buy them food? Stop to talk to them? Walk away? Something else?

Meeting The Text

You are about to read the Norman MacCaig poem '*Assisi*'. As you read it for the first time, work out the answers to these questions.

1. Where does the speaker seem to be in this poem? Be as exact as you can.
2. Which two different individual people does he notice? What are these people doing?
3. Which group of people does he notice? What are these people doing?

Assisi

<i>The dwarf with his hands on backwards sat, slumped like a half-filled sack on tiny twisted legs from which sawdust might run, outside the three tiers of churches built in honour of St Francis, brother of the poor, talker with birds, over whom he had the advantage of not being dead yet.</i>	5
<i>A priest explained how clever it was of Giotto to make his frescoes tell stories that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness of God and the suffering of His Son. I understood the explanation and the cleverness.</i>	10 15
<i>A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly, fluttered after him as he scattered the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed the ruined temple outside, whose eyes wept pus, whose back was higher than his head, whose lopsided mouth said Grazie in a voice as sweet as a child's when she speaks to her mother or a bird's when it spoke to St Francis.</i>	20 25

Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially at how MacCaig describes the beggar, and at the poet's reactions as he sees how other characters in the poem respond to the beggar. We'll work through the poem step by step, with teaching and commentary. **Key techniques** will be picked out in **bold** and there will be short questions for you to answer.

The Title

MacCaig's life, and his poetry, were closely connected with two places, Edinburgh and the north-west of Scotland. This poem is unusual therefore because it is very obviously set somewhere very different, the Italian town of Assisi.

MacCaig wants his readers to know the poem is set there, because he expects that place name to bring the name of a particular person to the reader's mind. In the years since this poem was written, Britain has become a much less religious country, and this reference may need more explanation for us as we read the poem today. Whether or not you are religious, you need to know about some Christian ideas, and some church history, to be able to appreciate what MacCaig is saying in this poem.

The person that the title should bring to mind is Saint Francis of Assisi, a figure still highly honoured and respected in the Catholic Church. Francis was born in Assisi in 1182 to rich parents, but as a young man he spent time living as a beggar. After becoming a monk he devoted himself to a life of poverty, wearing simple peasant clothing. He and the monks who followed him cared for the poor. Francis also believed that all of nature was sacred because it showed what God was like. He regarded animals as his brothers and sisters, caring for them as well as for people, and he preached God's message to animals and birds as well as to people.

Stanza One

The opening stanza begins by introducing the first character, describing him in some detail:

*"The dwarf with his hands on backwards
sat, slumped like a half-filled sack
on tiny twisted legs from which
sawdust might run,"*

That first phrase, "*The dwarf*" immediately makes the man seem less than human. We know that dwarfism is a medical condition that causes disability, but the word "*dwarf*" has many other, perhaps more immediate, associations. It might make us think of characters from *Harry Potter*, or *Lord of the Rings*. These are fictional, mythical characters, which makes the disabled beggar seem not fully human.

The next detail, that the man has his "*hands on backwards*" cannot be literally true. It just isn't possible. MacCaig is using **hyperbole**, the technique of exaggeration for literary effect. The beggar's hands cannot be "*on backwards*", but it's a very striking way of showing us that his arms are badly twisted and deformed.

The next line:

"sat slumped like a half-filled sack"

uses three sound techniques.

Q 1 What technique does MacCaig use by repeating the same sound at the start of three words in this line?

The second of these sound effect techniques, the use of repeated -s- sounds, is called **sibilance**.

The word “*slumped*” is an example of the third sound effect technique, **onomatopoeia**. This is a word where the sound matches the meaning. That -u- sound in the middle of “*slumped*” makes the whole word sound collapsed and slumpy.

By combining three sound effects like this, the writer really grabs our attention, forcing us to focus on his description, and on the beggar’s condition.

Q 2 The writer also uses a **simile** in this line. Explain how this again makes the beggar seem less than human.

The overall effect is of something like a scarecrow, or a dummy, and not a very well-made one either.

Q 3 How does the writer also use **alliteration** to draw our attention in line 3?

Q 4 How does line 4 yet again dehumanise this disabled man?

Then we see where the beggar is:

*“outside the three tiers of churches built
in honour of St Francis, brother
of the poor, talker with birds, over whom
he had the advantage
of not being dead yet.”*

The poet’s **word choice** of “*outside*” tells us the man is marginalised, kept out, not made welcome.

This is a good moment for you to look on the Internet for an image of the Church of Saint Francis in Assisi. (Make sure you actually get the right church, the one IN Assisi - there are lots of churches all over the world named after Francis OF Assisi!) You should see a gleaming white, multi-layered building.

MacCaig’s reference to the “*three tiers*” of the church isn’t just a good description. It should also make us think of something else that is often coloured white and comes in tiers, a wedding cake. MacCaig isn’t criticising weddings, but he is saying that the church is too much and too elaborate. The church is excessive and over the top.

How do we know the poet feels this way about that church building? Because he reminds us that it was built:

*“in honour of St Francis, brother
of the poor”*

That **word choice** of “*brother*” stresses how Francis saw himself as being equal to the poor. It seems very odd therefore that such a good and holy man, who lived such a simple life, has been commemorated with this flashy, opulent building that now refuses to welcome such a poor and needy beggar.

MacCaig tells us the beggar has just one “*advantage*” over St Francis: “*not being dead yet*”. That’s a very bitter, cynical, ironic example of **word choice**. If the only “*advantage*” a person has is that they are “*not dead yet*”, they don’t have much of an advantage.

Q 5 What does the **word choice** of “*yet*” at the end of the stanza suggest?

Overall, this first stanza focuses on the beggar, and then **contrasts** him with the elaborate, highly-decorated church.

This suggests one **theme** of the poem: hypocrisy. The Catholic Church honours St Francis, but doesn’t back that up in its actions. The Church has spent lots of money, time and energy on a building, but it ignores and rejects the disabled beggar, even though the beggar is the kind of person that Francis himself would have cared for.

Stanza Two

After focussing on the beggar in stanza 1, MacCaig now turns his attention to a new character, a priest who is guiding a group of tourists around the church.

*“A priest explained
how clever it was of Giotto
to make his frescoes tell stories
that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness
of God and the suffering
of His Son. I understood
the explanation and
the cleverness.”*

You may need a little more context here. The Italian word *fresco* means fresh. A fresco is a kind of painting where the paint is applied directly onto a wall while the plaster is still fresh and damp, so that the picture becomes almost part of the wall. The church in this poem is decorated with a number of frescos, including a series telling the life story of St Francis, painted by Giotto, who worked in Italy in the 1290s. You can see images of these on the Internet.

When the priest explains “*how clever it was of Giotto*” he is really showing off his own cleverness. He is making a point of the fact that he understands Giotto’s work well enough to explain it to others. The priest, who ought to be a humble man of God, is filled with pride about his own knowledge of cultured things.

We see his pride even more when he uses the rather disdainful **word choice** of “*illiterate*”. This word literally means that someone is not able to read and write, but it isn’t a word we would use nowadays. It has strong connotations of blaming that person for their own shortcomings, or looking down on them because of what they cannot do.

The priest is right that Giotto, and other religious artists, were painting to reveal God to people who couldn’t read about him in a Bible. But, at the time when Giotto was painting, more than 700 years ago, almost nobody could read or write. People would only have a chance to become literate then if they came from a very rich family, or if they went into the church and spent life as a monk or nun. The vast majority of people - and especially girls and women - were uneducated. It wasn’t their fault, and there was no way they could have changed their situation. The opportunities just weren’t there for them.

In that situation, religious pictures played an important part in helping know the stories of their faith. Giotto’s frescos helped people who could not read understand:

*“the goodness
of God and the suffering
of His Son.”*

The **double alliteration** of -g- and -s- sounds here draws our attention to the message the Church is meant to spread. (Remember, you do not have to agree with this, but you do have to understand it to grasp the poem properly.) The Church should be teaching that God is good, and loves the people He created. The Christian message says that that the only way to save people from their sin, and all the wrong things they did, was for God to send his Son Jesus to live on Earth as a human. When he suffered and died on a cross, Jesus took away all the punishment for human sin. All people had to do to be saved was to follow God.

So, that’s what the church should be teaching: a good God, and a son who suffers for God’s people. Unfortunately, the church in Assisi is not doing the beggar any good. The beggar is suffering while the rich church grows even richer by becoming a tourist attraction.

MacCaig tells us:

*“I understood
the explanation and
the cleverness.”*

The mood changes here from pity for the beggar to anger with the priest. MacCaig sees right through him. He understands that the priest is explaining so that he can show off

his own cleverness; he's not explaining so he can point to the amazing skills of Giotto, or to the message that Giotto's frescos convey.

The priest is able to see the suffering Giotto depicted in his paintings, but is blind to the sufferings of the disabled beggar. The priest knows the meaning of the paintings, but cannot understand the message in the living picture of the beggar. To be knowledgeable, or intelligent, is no good if you cannot be compassionate and kind as well.

Stanza Three

The focus now turns to the tourists who are being guided around the church by the priest:

*“A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,
fluttered after him as he scattered
the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed”
the ruined temple outside”*

Q 6 What creatures are the tourists being compared to here?

This **metaphor** isn't a flattering one. It makes the tourists seem silly, scatty, and not capable of thinking for themselves. They believe whatever they are told by the priest. They are not seen as individuals. The speaker is almost contemptuous towards them. This might seem rather cruel, and it might seem as if the speaker is putting himself above them. But, if they are quite *“contented”* with a situation where a disabled man is ignored and marginalised, perhaps they deserve to be treated this way.

The priest's talk to the tourists is referred to as him scattering *“the grain of the Word”*. MacCaig is making an **allusion**, a reference to something he expects his readers to recognise. Because his **allusion** is to a Bible story, and because we live in a much less religious time, you may need some more context here.

Jesus often used stories called parables to explain things to his followers. These parables used examples people would recognise to help them understand the new ideas Jesus wanted to communicate to them.

One of these stories is known as the Parable of the Sower, and is about a farmer going out to sow seed. The seed in the parable stands for God's Word, the message of God. In his parable, Jesus made it clear that not every seed that is sown will grow and flourish. Some seeds fall on good ground and become healthy crops. Seeds that fall on stony ground will wither and dry up in the sun. This means that lots of people might hear God's Word, but not everyone will actually listen to it and follow it.

Now that we've understood the **allusion** MacCaig is using, let's apply it to this poem.

The church, and the priest, know what God's Word says. They have heard the message about a good and loving God. But, like stony ground where a seed cannot flourish, they have not properly taken this message in. The beggar is kept outside of the church, and is ignored by the priest and the flock of tourists following him.

Q 7 Which item of **word choice** in line 20 proves the tourists ignore the beggar?

MacCaig now switches his character focus again, turning his attention back to the beggar. He uses another **metaphor** here, calling the beggar a “*ruined temple*”. This is also an **allusion** to the Bible, where the human body is described as “*a temple of the Holy Spirit*”. This means that God lives in the people who follow him. The human body is therefore something wonderful, something that should be cared for.

If MacCaig calls the beggar a “*temple*” he is saying that the Spirit of God lives in this poor, disabled man, and that the beggar is precious and worth caring for.

When MacCaig says that this “*temple*” is “*ruined*” he is referring to the man’s physical disabilities, **contrasting** the state of the beggar’s body with the beautiful, well-kept, church he sits outside.

The poet now described this “*ruined temple*” in more detail, saying that his:

“eyes
wept pus, whose back was higher
than his head”

This **grotesque description** again **contrasts** with the beauty of the church, and its Giotto frescos.

MacCaig closes the poem by telling us something very important about this man:

“whose lopsided mouth
said Grazie in a voice as sweet
as a child’s when she speaks to her mother
or a bird’s when it spoke
to St Francis.”

This is the first time in the poem that we see any sign of energy or life from the beggar.

Q 8 What does the Italian word “*grazie*” mean?

There are two surprises here:

1. That the man whose body has been made to seem so grotesque and mis-shapen can speak so sweetly
2. That he says what he says, given how badly he has been treated by the church, the priest, and the flock of tourists.

Q 9 Who do you think the beggar is saying thank you to?

Q 10 Why would he saying thank you?

The poet’s **word choice** of “*sweet*” totally changes the way we view this man.

Q 11 What does this word tell us and why is this surprising?

The **word choice** of “*child*” continues this change. It has connotations of innocence and vulnerability. It reminds us that this man needs care and protection, and prompts us to feel sympathy as we read.

The last line of the poem refers back to “*St Francis*”. We are reminded that the saint saw himself as a brother to all living creatures, and especially to the poor. The Church as an institution has become rich and powerful, to the point where it ignores a beggar sitting on its own doorstep. Francis would not have behaved this way.

This takes us back to that **theme** or message that we first saw in stanza 1, the hypocrisy of a Church that preaches one idea, but lives out a very different one.

Technique revision

Now that you’ve worked your way through all the work on ‘*Assisi*’ you should know the poem very well. It’s time to revise your knowledge of MacCaig’s techniques.

Take a large piece of paper. Mark it up into a grid like the one below. For every technique, fill in a quotation from the poem, and explain the effect it has on the reader. Some boxes have been filled in for you as examples.

Point - a technique	Evidence - a quotation	Explanation
simile	“ <i>like a half-filled sack</i> ”	Makes him seem less than human, like a scarecrow or dummy. Grotesque
alliteration	“ <i>tiny twisted legs</i> ”	Draws our attention to his disability <i>Continue the table on your own...</i>

For a grid about *Assisi* you also need to work with these techniques:

Take a separate row on your table for each of these different examples of word choice: *outside, three tiers, brother, advantage, yet, clever, illiterate, understood, contentedly; passed, ruined temple, sweet, child*

Take a separate row on your table for both different examples of allusion to the Bible

Then take a separate row on your table for each of these other techniques:

another example of alliteration as well as the one in the table above

hyperbole

contrast

sibilance

onomatopoeia

double alliteration

theme of hypocrisy

metaphor to describe the tourists

grotesque description