



Higher Still Notes

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Higher English

HSN41020
Assisi

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The Situation

A beggar sits outside the Church of St Francis in the Italian town of Assisi, and is ignored by the priest and tourists who are looking at Giotto's famous frescoes. MacCaig reflects on the ignorance of the tourists, and reveals a surprising quality of the dwarf which they missed because of their ignorance

Themes

- The Church – hypocrisy
- Plight/isolation of the disabled
- Fate's injustice
- Social contrast/injustice

Essay Plans – The Questions

Essay 1

‘...marriage and birth and death and thoughts of these...’

Show how ‘thoughts of these’ are evoked in you by a poem which deals with one or more of these themes. Explain by close reference to the techniques of the poem how the theme(s) is/are made memorable for you.

Main points

The question wants:

- Personal response concerning ‘thoughts’ the poem evokes
- An analysis of the techniques used to give you these thoughts
- How these make the theme(s) memorable

Essay 2

Choose a **poem** in which was written before you were born but whose message is still relevant today.

Show how the poet achieves this, and discuss how it adds to your appreciation of the poem.

In your answer you must refer closely to the text and at least two of: word choice, imagery, contrast, or any other appropriate feature.

‘...marriage and birth and death and thoughts of these...’

Technique	Examples	How does it relate to question?
Word choice	“not being dead <u>yet</u> ”	<i>Death</i> – The dwarf has life, but we are reminded this is only temporary.
Imagery	The dwarf: “hands on backwards” “half-filled sack” “tiny twisted legs” “ruined temple” “eyes wept pus” “back was higher than his head” “lopsided mouth”	<i>Birth</i> – MacCaig is expressing a discomfort with the idea of a human life taking such a shape, and an anger at any God of “goodness” who has such a being as part of His creation. This is turned over in the final stanza, where we learn the hidden beauty of nature, embodied in such an unlikely shell.
Sentence structure	Stanza 2 – First sentence is long and complex; contrasted with the short compound sentence that follows.	<i>Birth</i> – The comment is loaded with cynicism at the “cleverness” of the artist and the church in portraying a superficial message while blatantly ignoring its meaning.
Line breaks	v2;4 “goodness” v3;3 “passed”	<i>Birth/Marriage</i> – The placement of these breaks throws emphasis on the words; in the first instance highlighting the hypocrisy of the church and in the second the ignorance of the tourists.
Metaphor	v3;1-3 “rush of tourists, clucking contentedly, fluttered after him as he scattered the grain of the Word”	<i>Marriage</i> – Highly telling of MacCaig’s opinion of the tourists, comparing them to brainless chickens. Their superficiality is highlighted by the next sentence “It was they who had passed...” – they “flutter after...the grain”, but do not understand the lessons.
Irony	The juxtaposition of the dwarf and the church in v1 serves to indicate MacCaig’s disbelief at the irony of the situation.	<i>Birth</i> – With this, MacCaig draws attention to the incongruity of the poor cripple, sitting and largely being ignored, outside a church built “in honour of St Francis” – surely St Francis would have rather the money went to the cripple before such grandiose monuments? This causes me to question the values held by society, just as MacCaig clearly is.

A poem whose message is still relevant today

Word Choice

1. **“dwarf”** – in this context is derogatory which demeans the beggar and suggests he is disgusting
2. **“sat slumped”** – alliteration and onomatopoeia suggests that the dwarf is limp which suggests he is helpless due to his terrible deformities
3. **“yet”** – enjambment places this word at the end of a verse. This negates what seems to be the only positive aspect of the dwarf's life – that he is alive and gives the impression that there is nothing good about him
4. **“ruined”** – this gives the impression of a dilapidated building suggesting that the beggar is perhaps useless or that he is physically “ruined”

Imagery

1. **“hands on backwards”** – this suggests the physical ugliness of the dwarf
2. **“like a half-filled sack”** – comparison with an inanimate object suggests the dwarf is not human
3. **“tiny twisted legs from which/ sawdust might run”** – “twisted legs” suggests that the beggar's body is limp. “twisted” perhaps suggests he is internally corrupt. “from which sawdust might run” again links the dwarf to an inanimate object, or rather something that was once living but has been ground up into a pulp – perhaps suggests inner ugliness of dwarf
4. **“whose eyes/ wept pus”** – this gives a disgusting impression of the dwarf and suggests that he is unpleasant to look at. Also this suggests that the dwarf is ugly inside as the “eyes are the windows of the soul”
5. **“whose back was higher than his head”** – this perhaps pokes fun at the dwarf and suggests his only purpose is to be ridiculed
6. **“voice as sweet as a child's”** – despite all the horrific deformities of the dwarf, he has inner beauty which is unexpected and creates an anticlimax. Link to contrast

Contrast

1. Contrast between the ugly, deformed beggar and the elaborate church he is sitting in front of. This emphasises the ugliness of the beggar and makes him seem even more grotesque
2. Contrast between the actions of St Francis and the actions of religious people in the modern world. His teachings have not been followed and the dwarf has been labelled as a freak and isolated from society and charity
3. Contrast between what the priest preaches and what he practices – he “scattered the grain of the Word” but did not eat it himself – he missed the message of “love thy neighbour” in the Bible
4. Contrast between the dwarf's appearance and reality. The sweet voice demonstrates that the beggar is, in some way, good despite all of the prejudgements made about him by the priest and the tourists

Essay 1

In “Assisi”, Norman MacCaig inspires thought on the broad themes of birth, marriage and death. I intend to show, through close examination of the text, the techniques he uses to inspire such thought, and how these methods of writing make the subject of the poem memorable.

The opening verse introduces two different aspects MacCaig wishes the reader to consider: in the foreground we are shown a deformed dwarf with “hands on backwards” and “twisted legs”, which is then contrasted with the “three tiers of churches” behind him. The irony of this situation is not wasted on MacCaig, especially since the churches were built “in honour of St Francis”. To make the point even clearer, St Francis is immediately confirmed as “brother of the poor”. This ironic juxtaposition encouraged me to think about the values held by society, and the hypocrisy often evident in our actions – or, in the case of the dwarf and others like him, our inaction. MacCaig’s questioning of such social conventions could be likened to the position a child faces when trying to understand the adult world around them.

The idea of death is suggested at the end of verse one, when MacCaig comments that the dwarf’s being alive is only a temporary advantage. This harsh reality is summed up in the word “yet”:

“...he had the advantage
of not being dead yet.”

It seems strange to consider the life of the dwarf an advantage, when he is so obviously deformed and uncomfortable; this may be MacCaig hinting at what will later be revealed, or could just be a tendency toward optimism.

Irony is again used in the second verse, where MacCaig recounts the words of a priest during what is probably a guided tour inside the church. The priest comments on the cleverness of Giotto, who painted frescoes to relate Bible stories to the illiterate. From the situation of the dwarf outside, the reader, like MacCaig, can appreciate that these stories may have been well told, but clearly were not effective in teaching people about the way we should behave with one another. The verse comprises two sentences, and the relatively succinct second sentence conveys MacCaig’s cynical response to the priest’s words:

“I understand
the explanation and
the cleverness.”

I think the ‘cleverness’ he understands is that the frescoes represent an early form of propaganda; showing people a tainted view of the situation, consequently allowing blatant hypocrisy to take place, namely the rich church building monuments to its heroes while ignoring the poor.

MacCaig’s distaste at what he sees is continued in the final stanza, where he uses an extended metaphor comparing the tourists visiting the church to chickens:

“A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,
fluttered after him as he scattered
the grain of the Word.”

The tourists, or perhaps their cameras, cluck in a similar manner to chickens, as well as their fluttering after ‘grain’. This portrayal is rather unfavourable, and continues to prompt thought concerning the superficial nature of beliefs and values. With this, we are brought sharply back to the dwarf, as MacCaig notes:

“It was they who had passed
the ruined temple outside”

This phrase leads in to the crux of his argument, and is a last gibe at the tourists. He uses a line break after “passed” to draw attention to the word, further emphasising the ignorance of the tourists. The metaphor “ruined temple” is especially appropriate considering the religious surroundings, and the traditional belief that the body is a ‘temple’ intended for the temporary residence of the soul. That the dwarf’s temple is “ruined” brings us back to his horrific deformities, whereupon MacCaig continues citing the various afflictions of the dwarf:

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

The first image is probably the most shocking of all those presented in the poem, partly through the emphasis created by the line break, but also due to the horrific image and the connotations of “eyes”, traditionally portals into the soul.

Through all this build up of description from MacCaig, we reach a climax at this point. With “whose lopsided mouth”, we expect further deformities to be detailed, but MacCaig reveals to us the point he wishes to make. Unexpectedly, the dwarf has

“a voice as sweet
as a child’s when she speaks to her mother”

and so we are shown a hidden beauty which the ignorant tourists will never see, since they simply walk past in search of more obvious, superficial beauties.

Nevertheless, this neat, almost saccharine ending cannot negate all the arguments that MacCaig has presented to us; the harsh portrayals of ignorance, hypocrisy and ‘cleverly’ employed propaganda are all still valid, and the imagery and cynicism with which the portrayals were formed create a powerful and lasting impression. The “goodness of God” is left in tatters when faced with the deformities the dwarf endures, and although it could be argued that God intends the concealed beauty of the dwarf’s voice to teach a lesson, I feel it could equally well be considered a cruel joke.

Certainly, “Assisi” contains arguments which stimulate thoughts ranging from birth, creation and the nature of life in general; through marriage or other human relationships; to death and the evaluation of life. I found MacCaig done so in an interesting way, using powerful language techniques, such as imagery and irony. The impression of this poem on me will, I am sure, last a long time.

Essay 2

The poem “Assisi” was written by Norman MacCaig before I was born, however the message which MacCaig communicates is still relevant today. I intend to show, through examination of word choice, imagery and contrast, how the poet creates the impression that there is nothing positive about the beggar, and how this impression portrays the message that appearances can be deceptive.

The word “dwarf” in the context of stanza one is derogatory towards the beggar and singles him out as different. This gives the impression that he is abnormal and makes the beggar seem ugly. The phrase “sat slumped” uses alliteration and onomatopoeia to give the impression that the dwarf is limp due to his horrific deformities. This creates the impression that the dwarf is grotesque. The use of enjambment places the word “yet” at the end of the first verse. This negates what seems to be the only positive aspect of the dwarf’s life; the fact that he is alive. This suggests that the dwarf’s life is not positive in any way and suggests that he has nothing to live for, which further emphasises the plight of the beggar. The word “ruined” in stanza three likens the dwarf to a dilapidated building which suggests he is perhaps useless, or just physically “ruined”, and increases the pity the reader must feel for him.

Vivid images are also skilfully used by MacCaig to show the dwarf’s plight. In the first verse, we are told that the dwarf has “his hands on backwards” which again suggests he is helpless because of his terrible deformities. The simile “like a half-filled sack” links the beggar to an inanimate object which suggests he is not human. Also the use of “half-filled” perhaps links to his physical shortness but may refer to him being only “half a man” and that he is ugly on the inside as well as out. The metaphor of the dwarf’s “tiny twisted legs from which / sawdust might run” again suggests the beggar is not human. The use of “sawdust” suggests that the beggar was once alive but has been turned into a pulp, like sawdust. This perhaps suggests he has been corrupted and is emotionally dead. Also the use of the word “twisted” could suggest that the dwarf is in some way corrupt internally.

In the final verse we are told that the beggar’s “eyes wept pus”. This image again suggests that there is absolutely no good in him as Christianity states that “the eyes are the windows of the soul”. The word “wept” also suggest that the beggar is distressed which increases the reader’s pity for him. The image of the dwarf where his “back was higher than his head” seems to be making fun of the beggar, suggesting that his only purpose is to be ridiculed. This strengthens the picture of the dwarf as an isolated freak.

Contrast is also used to increase the sense of the dwarf’s ugliness. The fact that the ugly, deformed beggar is sitting in front of the beautiful and elaborate church heightens the sense of the dwarf’s ugliness and increases the negative portrayal of him. There is also contrast between St Francis’ actions and the actions of the Church today. Had the dwarf been living at the time of St Francis, he would have been helped, but because the Church has missed the message of St Francis; they have built an elaborate church in his “honour” instead of helping the dwarf, and others who could benefit. There is also contrast in the teachings of the priest and his actions. Despite the fact that he preaches the Bible, he has missed the messages of “love thy neighbour” and The Parable of the Good Samaritan, this increases the feeling that the dwarf’s suffering is unnecessary.

The final contrast comes in the final verse where we are told that the dwarf's voice is "as sweet as a child's". It is at this point which we discover the message of the poem; that appearances can be deceptive. This also suggests that the dwarf is good in some way and that he is only physically ugly. The fact that the dwarf says "Grazie" suggests that he is grateful for life; something which is also surprising considering his horrific deformities.

Through examination of the techniques of Norman MacCaig, I feel I have demonstrated that the poet creates a negative and pitiful picture of the beggar, before revealing his inner quality. This makes it clear that our first impressions of people can be drastically different from what the person is like inside. This is a message which is still relevant today.