

This topical and meaningful poem, "Human," concerns the societal issue of homelessness and the feelings of compassionate awareness that dawns in the speaker. The poem's relevance, descriptive specificity, inspiring title, and use of varying section lengths give this poem a place in this age group.

The poem begins innocently enough, describing a city scene. The pair in the poem "turn onto Main Street" where "the ocean's roar / turns to the hum of people" and where "restaurants line the road" unlike "palms along the beach." Foreshadowing the events in the poem, the speaker states, "We venture further into the gut of the street."

The next two sections begin the pivotal entry of a homeless person into the scene and the speaker's reaction. The poem's second section contains only one line, "I see you." That this line stands alone, addresses the speaker's consternation at seeing this person and the dramatic importance of her appearance. The poem then describes the "you" as someone who leans "on a brick ledge, feet planted on cracked sidewalk. / Worn, black leggings hug your legs." Other clothes are "a brown, tattered jacket" and "an army green backpack [that] crosses lightly at your chest." The specific language used here, from the clothing of the woman to the "cracked sidewalk" gives detail that enables the reader to 'see' this person.

In the next section, we see the speaker's lack of compassion and empathy. The poet again employs the dramatic one-line statement: "You stand there, a mannequin." In this one line, the speaker assigns no human qualities to this person, only those of a stylized and three-dimensional representation of the human form that is often used in window displays as a prop for clothing—or as sometimes referred to—a dummy.

The next section reveals the speaker's almost revulsion to this person:

We near you, and I shudder without knowing why.  
Was it out of fear? Pity? Dislike?  
Maybe all three.  
Your clear voice surprises me.  
*Do you have any spare change?*  
*I'm trying to put something together for dinner.*  
Instinctively, I look away, to disguise my disgust.

We see the speaker's reaction to the woman as one of "fear," "pity," "dislike," or "disgust." These adjectives are immediately followed with a third one-line description of the homeless person: "Your golden eyes plea for an answer." Now we begin to see some change of heart through the description.

Next, the speaker's sympathy begins. He or she reveals stereotypical ideas held about the homeless: "Don't homeless people just sit in alleyways / and hold a sign that begs for money?" Also, this one: "Don't they just wait for someone to drop / money into their ripped plastic cup?" And, finally, the speaker asks, "Why is this woman talking to us so sincerely?"

Despite this encouraging description, the young speaker keeps walking, but his father does not. The last pivotal stand-alone line reads, and as if he is pulled to do so, "I look back at you." What the speaker sees is the father giving "a five dollar bill and a few coins from his wallet" to the person whose hands cup together to receive the change that "clashes: music to your ears."

The poem concludes with the opposite opinion than began it. The woman is described first: "You lean on the brick ledge, / Your feet planted on cracked sidewalk," then the speaker states his or her new conclusion concerning this homeless person: "A smile on your face—no longer just a mannequin, / You're human."

The speaker's father giving money to the homeless person and the person's humanity most likely are the reasons for the speaker's emotional turnaround. Because the father does not give his child a lecture on the benefits of charity to someone less fortunate, the poem is more effective, since the speaker sees first hand the benefits of such charity. The poem also makes the speaker and reader aware that the homeless aren't always found in alleys with signs begging for money; they are found on city sidewalks "asking for change" to put "*something together for dinner.*"

To thoroughly demonstrate this reversal, the poet takes the last word of the poem, "human," as its title and not "mannequin"; the meaning of these two words could not be more dissimilar. Their difference: "human," meaning a thinking, sentient being, while the other, "mannequin," signifies an inanimate object, with its only relationship to "human" is its shape.

"Human" is a perceptive and thoughtful poem. Let's hope this writer continues to use his or her pen as an advocate for intelligent and insightful poetry.

*Thank you for the pleasure of reading your work!*

Marie Kane, Final Judge  
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2018