

Scottish Poetry Library

GLASGOW SONNET I by Edwin Morgan

Resource by Jane Cooper

Getting In

Before you read the poem, think about these questions:

1. How do you feel about the area where you live? What do you like and dislike about it?
2. If an outsider was going to criticise the place where you live, what would they say about it?

Meeting the text You are about to read the poem. As you read it for the first time, do these things:

1. Count how many syllables there are in each line of the poem.
2. Work out the rhyme scheme. Label the first rhyming sound, at the end of line 1, as A, and use the same letter at the end of any line where that sound recurs. Label the next new rhyming sound as B and use the same letter at the end of any line where that sound recurs. Keep going like this. **HINT** you shouldn't go beyond the letter D!

GLASGOW SONNET *i*

*A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash.
Hackles on puddles rise, old mattresses
puff briefly and subside. Play-fortresses
of brick and bric-a-brac spill out some ash. 5
Four storeys have no windows left to smash,
but in the fifth a chipped sill buttresses
mother and daughter the last mistresses
of that black block condemned to stand, not crash.
Around them the cracks deepen, the rats crawl.
The kettle whimpers on a crazy hob. 10
Roses of mould grow from ceiling to wall.
The man lies late since he has lost his job,
smokes on one elbow, letting his coughs fall
thinly into an air too poor to rob.*

Some context for *Glasgow Sonnet i*

Before we start to look at Morgan's ideas, and at the techniques he uses to put them across, it's useful to think about two things, the **form** of poetry he is using here, and the **historical context** in which he wrote it.

The sonnet form

As the title says, this is a **sonnet**, a particular form of poem with certain rules. A sonnet should have 14 lines, and these lines are usually 10 syllables long. Most sonnets rhyme. One common sonnet rhyme scheme goes like this:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

This is called the Shakespearian sonnet, because he wrote so many of them. Here's one, his sonnet number 12:

*When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls, all silver'd o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard;
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake,
And die as fast as they see others grow;*

*And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.*

There are other rhyme schemes too. The Petrarchan sonnet (named after an Italian poet from the 14th century) goes like this:

ABBA ABBA CD CD CD

You should have found that Petrarchan rhyme scheme in Morgan's '*Glasgow Sonnet i*'.

Sonnets are usually printed in one block of 14 lines, without any stanza breaks, but they do usually divide into two parts. Many sonnets have a "turn" called the **volta** between the eighth and ninth lines of the poem. The eight lines before the volta in a sonnet are called the octet. The six lines that come after the volta are called the sestet.

The volta creates a change of mood, or tone, or a move to a different part of the writer's idea or argument. Can you see the volta in the Shakespeare sonnet above?

You should have noticed that Edwin Morgan's *Glasgow Sonnet i* keeps to the usual sonnet rules:

- Every line has exactly 10 syllables
- There is a rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CD CD CD, making this a Petrarchan sonnet
- The poem has a volta: lines 1 to 8 concentrate on the outside of the ruined tenement, while lines 9 to 14 take us inside.

The social context

Today's Glasgow is a vibrant, lively, prosperous city. Glasgow in the late 1960s and early 70s was quite different. The collapse of traditional heavy industries such as shipbuilding caused mass unemployment and grinding poverty. Many Glaswegians lived in decaying tenement buildings, often without their own bathrooms or toilets. The Alan Spence play '*Sailmaker*', which is also on the Scottish text list for the National 5 English exam, is set in Glasgow in the 1960s, and picks up on many of the social challenges the city faced at that time.

Glasgow also had a reputation for gang violence, with gangsters notorious for using knives.

You can easily find images online that will show you what 1960s Glasgow looked like. Try searching for pictures by Nick Hedges, Oscar Mazaroli or Joseph Mackenzie, or just looking in Google Images for "1960s Glasgow". If you study this sonnet after looking at some of those images, you'll see how Morgan's words bring these pictures to life, and how his writing makes the reader confront and recognise real social problems.

This poem is the first of a series of 10 sonnets published together in 1972. In a later interview, Morgan said about these poems: "*I'm trying to force the reader to get to*

grips with the subject: Glasgow has real social, human problems, and at that time – in the 70s – many things seemed to be going wrong.” He said he intended, “to write a series of sonnets about the social and political problems of a modern city.”

Let’s Get To Work

As we study this poem, we’ll look especially at how Morgan conveys a setting, and the lives of the people who inhabit that place. 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 think about.

The Title

We saw earlier that, in terms of its rhythm, rhyme and structure, this sonnet seems to stick to the expected pattern. But, there’s one way in which it **misleads** us.

Sonnets are most often associated with love poetry. Shakespeare wrote a sequence of 154 love sonnets; Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote 44. Sonnets are often used as readings at weddings and partnership ceremonies. People who know even just a little about poetry would think that “sonnet” suggests a love poem.

This isn’t a love poem.

We might look at the title and expect romance; instead, we find poverty and despair. The effect of this is immediately shocking, because we’ve been wrong-footed - we don’t get what we think the poem might be about to give us.

However there is a way in which the title is **accurate**. As well as telling us clearly and simply where the poem is set, it also hints what that setting is like. Especially to people who didn’t live there, Glasgow at the time when the poem was published had a reputation as a tough, run-down, violent place. By putting “*Glasgow*” in the title, Morgan brings that **stereotype** to mind.

So, this title is really cleverly chosen, because it leads into a poem that does two almost opposite things at once: confirming a **stereotype** about 1960s Glasgow, while going against our **stereotyped** view of what we might find in a sonnet.

Lines 1 - 8: the octet

In line 1, Morgan starts to describe a backcourt, one of the open, shared spaces behind a street of Glasgow tenements:

“A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash”

He grabs our attention straight away by using a sound effect technique.

Q1 Which **sound effect technique** does he use in this line?

He **personifies** the wind, making something non-human feel alive and active. This is done through his use of **word choice**. Making the wind “*mean*” suggests that it is nasty,

malicious and spiteful, immediately implying a hostile environment. Saying that the wind “wanders” brings to mind something that is aimless, lacking in energy or purpose. So, this backcourt is unpleasant - it’s filled with “trash” - but it’s also pointless, worthless.

The wind isn’t the only thing that seems weirdly alive here.

*“Hackles on puddles rise, old mattresses
puff briefly and subside.”*

Q2 Which animal do we think of as having hackles? What mood is the animal in if its hackles rise?

Q3 What does that therefore suggest about this environment?

The “trash” in the backcourt includes “old mattresses”, and they are **personified** too. The word choice of “puff briefly” and “subside” makes it seem as if they have hardly any breath of life in them, no energy. They just give up. They are unhealthy and exhausted, like the environment they lie in, and like the people who live there (whom we will meet later in the sonnet).

Morgan goes on to describe how:

*“Play fortresses
of brick and bric-a-brac spill out some ash.”*

Remember, this a domestic environment, a space shared by neighbours behind their homes. Morgan’s **word choice** of “fortresses” suggests somewhere very non-domestic. He is describing the dens and imaginary castles that the tenement children have made in the backcourt out of old junk, but he’s made these playthings sound unusually serious.

Q4 What are the connotations of the word “fortresses”?

If their pretend castles are “fortresses”, Morgan may be implying that life will be a battle for the tenement children. They are attacked by the poverty they live in. He might even be hinting that their play battles now could mature into more real, and more sinister, gang warfare as they grow up.

Look at Morgan’s use of **alliteration** in “brick and bric-a-brac”. Those repeated -br- sounds are abrasive - hard and scratchy - drawing our attention to the children’s hard life, one in which their playthings are just discarded junk.

Their fortresses “spill out some ash”, another key piece of **word choice**. You only get ash when something has been burnt up. “Ash” suggests ruin and destruction and, because of the well-known words “ashes to ashes” in a funeral service, death.

The poet’s eye now looks up, away from the backcourt to the buildings around it, telling us:

“Four storeys have no windows left to smash.”

There’s been vandalism, and the stone-throwing didn’t stop because the vandals gave up, but only because they ran out of targets they could reach.

One storey above this damage:

*“in the fifth a chipped sill buttresses
mother and daughter the last mistresses
of that black block condemned to stand, not crash.”*

Around the time when Morgan was writing his Glasgow Sonnets, a major programme of what was sometimes called “slum clearance” was underway in the city. Thousands of blocks of tenement flats were knocked down by the city council, and the residents were moved to new high-rise blocks on the edges of the city in estates like Castlemilk and Easterhouse. (This didn’t provide any long-term solution to the problems many of these people faced, but that’s another story.)

The mother and daughter here seem to be the last residents, waiting to be moved out. We know they are looking out the window because the poem mentions a “*chipped sill*”. These characters seem very weak. A buttress is an architectural element that holds up a building. If the “*sill buttresses*” them, this means that the window ledge they are leaning on is holding them up, supporting them. The two female characters are weaker than the broken down, 80% ruined, building that they live in, and the window sill is **personified** as their supporter.

Morgan’s **word choice** of “*mistresses*” is **ambiguous** - it has two possible shades of meaning, and we can’t choose one over the other.

On the one hand, calling them “*mistresses*” sounds as if the poet is showing them his respect, calling them the rulers, saying that they are in charge.

On the other hand, they are the “*mistresses*” of nothing worth having, so it’s hardly much of an honour or compliment. It’s ironic.

Morgan uses **alliteration** again to draw our attention, this time to the “*black block*”. This is also an example of **internal rhyme**, when words inside the same line of a poem rhyme with each other. Again, this grabs our attention, making us focus on the “**black block**” and see how grim it is. His **word choice** of “*black*” here suggests depression and darkness, and the word “*condemned*” suggests that the block isn’t going to be just knocked down but executed, exterminated, as if it has committed some kind of terrible crime.

Look at that group of lines again:

*“in the fifth a chipped sill buttresses
mother and daughter the last mistresses
of that black block condemned to stand, not crash.”*

There is more **ambiguity** here:

Is it the black block that has been condemned to stand - left vertical when it would be far better to destroy it?

Or are the mother and daughter condemned to stand - stuck there by the window, looking down on the trashy fortresses below?

Either way, both the building and the people have been left abandoned and uncared for.

The volta

We've reached the point, between line 8 and line 9, when a classic sonnet will turn and make a change.

Morgan's **volta** is a change in what he is looking at. Lines 1 to 8 focus on the dirty, unpleasant external environment of the backcourt. The two people we see are viewed from outside, through the last unbroken window.

Lines 9 to 14 focus on the internal environment, as we start to see inside their flat.

Lines 9 - 14: the sestet

Line 10 takes us inside the mother and daughter's flat:

"Around them the cracks deepen, the rats crawl"

Again it seems as if they are trapped there, with the flat breaking up and getting worse around them.

The word choice of "**rats**" has connotations of disease and fear - you really wouldn't want to have rats in your house, would you? The derelict block of flats seems to be infested with vermin, but they aren't as lively as we might expect.

Q5 Which **word choice** tells us the rats lack the energy we might expect?

We find out more about the room:

*"The kettle whimpers on a crazy hob.
Roses of mould grow from ceiling to wall."*

Two non-living things are brought to life here.

Q6 What does the **word choice** of "*whimpers*" make us think of?

Q7 Which word is used to **personify** the hob? What does that word suggest?

Morgan's **word choice** of "*roses*" to show the shape of the mould is rather **ironic**. Roses in a poem usually suggest qualities like romance, or beauty, but here the word is used for something nasty growing across a wall, suggesting decay and disgust. He underlines this by using **assonance**, the sound effect technique when different words use the same vowel sound. The long -o- sounds in the words rOses and grOw mimic the slow spreading out of the roses of mould.

Finally, the poet shows us the last character who lives in that flat:

*"The man lies late since he has lost his job,
Smokes on one elbow, letting his coughs fall
Thinly into an air too poor to rob."*

By using the **definite article** “*The*” Morgan shows us this is the only man left in the building. Also, though we were shown the female characters together, and they were described with the words “*mother and daughter*”, giving them a strong sense of relationship, the man is isolated, alone. He’s called “*The man*”, not the father or the husband. The fact that the mother and daughter do relate to each other, while he is written about only as a “*man*” may suggest that family relationships have broken down, perhaps as a result of the poverty, unemployment and deprivation this family has had to face.

None of the characters in this poem have been given names. On the one hand, this makes the poem universal, as if it could apply to lots of people. This emphasises that many Glaswegians were dealing with these challenging circumstances at that time. However it also has another effect: making them **nameless** makes it seem as if society doesn’t care about them as individuals.

Morgan uses **alliteration** in line 12.

Q8 Which words in that line have alliteration?

Q9 Which word in line 13 also begins with that same sound?

This technique, as usual, draws our attention. The repeated use of the soft, lazy *-l-* sound emphasises the man’s inertia: his stillness and lack of movement or energy.

That line also tells us why the man has lost all of his energy and vibrancy, because he has “*lost his job*”. There was mass unemployment in Glasgow at the time Morgan was writing. The man is not even out of bed yet, he “*lies late*.” He has nothing to do, and nothing to get up for, so he lies in bed and does nothing.

If you look again at that line:

“*The man lies late since he has lost his job*”

You will see that it is made of **monosyllables**: words of just one syllable. Using ten of these together gives a sense of hardness and harshness that matches the harsh and hard situation this family lives in.

Earlier in the poem we had some mattresses that lacked energy, and could only “*puff briefly and subside*”. We also had rats with the strength only to “*crawl*”. This man is “*letting his coughs fall*” as if he hasn’t even got the energy to blast out a proper, loud cough. And he coughs “*thinly*”. Like the building he lives in, he is weak, diminished and useless.

The last line of the poem describes the air around the man as “*too poor to rob*”. This is another example of **ambiguity**, this time with three suggested meanings.

The air, full of
mould and smoke
is poor quality.

The man owns nothing
worth stealing.

Nothing in the
building is worth
ripping up to steal.

The overall message

This poem arouses a strong reaction in us as we read it. We feel disgust at the description of the surroundings, sympathy for the people who still have to live there, anger and despair at the social situation that has caused all of this.

Edwin Morgan was born in Glasgow, and he lived and worked there all his life. He was a proud Glaswegian, and also a passionate Scottish Nationalist. So why would he paint such a desperate picture of the city he loved?

Because he loved it.

Because he wanted to make a statement.

Because he saw the state his city was in and wanted it to be a better place.

Because he saw how some people were forced to live, and wanted them to have better lives.

Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through all the work on '*Glasgow Sonnet i*' you should know the poem very well. It's time to revise your knowledge of Morgan'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 - quotation	Explanation of effect
misleading title	<i>Glasgow Sonnet</i>	" <i>Sonnet</i> " makes the reader expect a love poem, when this is actually about despair and deprivation. This immediately shocks the reader
accurate title	<i>Glasgow Sonnet</i>	" <i>Glasgow</i> " makes the original 1970s reader think of a tough and run-down city, which tells us what to expect from the poem <i>Continue yourself...</i>

You can carry on the rest of the table yourself. You'll need a whole sheet of paper, maybe two, as you need to add the following techniques:

Give **each** of these examples of word choice a separate row on your table: *mean; wanders; trash; hackles . . . rise; puff briefly; subside; fortresses; ash; mistresses; black; condemned; rats; crawl; whimpers; roses; mother and daughter; letting + fall; thinly*

Give **each** of these personified items a separate row on your table: *wind; mattresses; sill; hob*

Give **each** of these examples of alliteration a separate row on your table: *wind wanders; brick and bric-a-brac; black block; lies late + lost + letting*

Give **each** of these examples of ambiguity a separate row on your table: *mistresses; condemned to stand; too poor to rob*

Explain the **two** different effects Morgan achieves by not naming any of his characters.

And then work on the following techniques:

confirming stereotypes

opposing stereotypes

internal rhyme

volta

assonance

definite article

monosyllables