

Scottish Poetry Library

GOOD FRIDAY by Edwin Morgan

Resource by Jane Cooper

This poem describes a real life encounter. Edwin Morgan once said:

"I think of poetry partly as . . . a special way of recording moments and events . . . I am very strongly moved by the absolute force of what actually happens"

and that's what he does with these particular poems. He also said he was fascinated by

"the romance of facts"

and in this poem we'll see him taking factual events and finding the romance and poetry in them.

Getting in Before you read the poem, think about these two questions:

1. What do you associate with Easter?
2. In the Christian Easter story, what happens on Good Friday?

Meeting the text You are about to read a poem about an encounter. As you read it for the first time, work out the answers to these questions:

1. Where (exactly) does this encounter happen?
2. When does it happen?
3. What happens?
4. Who is involved in this encounter?

GOOD FRIDAY

*Three o'clock. The bus lurches
round into the sun. "D's this go –"
he flops beside me – "right along Bath Street?
- Oh tha's right, tha's all right, see I've
got to get some Easter eggs for the kiddies. 5
I've had a wee drink, ye understand –
ye'll maybe think it's a – funny day
to be celebrating – well, no, but ye see
I wasny working, and I like to celebrate
when I'm no working – I don't say it's right 10
I'm no saying it's right, ye understand - ye understand?
But anyway tha's the way I look at it -
I'm no boring you, eh? Ye see today
take today, I don't know what today's in aid of,
whether Christ was – crucified or was he – 15
rose fae the dead like, see what I mean?
You're an educatit man, you can tell me -
- Aye, well. There ye are. It's been seen
time and again, the working man
has nae education. He jist canny – jist 20
hasny got it, know what I mean
he's jist bliddy ignorant – Christ aye,
bliddy ignorant. Well-" The bus brakes violently,
he lunges for the stair, swings down - off
into the sun for his Easter eggs 25
on very
 nearly
 steady
 legs.*

Thinking through First, share your answers to the "Meeting the text" questions you were given at the start of the poem.

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 the two characters in the poem. One of them is the narrator. We'll refer to the other as the working man because that's how he describes himself.

ACTIVE LEARNING Draw two stick men or gingerbread men in your notebook. Label them **the narrator** and **the working man**. Around your two cartoons, write down everything you know already about each character.

LET'S GET TO WORK As we study this poem we'll think look especially at how Morgan's language conveys the two different characters, and how he makes the encounter seem real.

Realism

The opening of the poem is full of **real life detail**. You already thought about this as you answered the "Meeting the text" questions. We know exactly where the encounter happens: on the top deck of a bus heading along Bath Street in Glasgow. We know exactly when it happens: three o'clock on Good Friday afternoon. We know the weather is sunny.

What Morgan doesn't do is describe the working man, at all. We don't know how old he is, what he looks like, what he is wearing.

(If you study to of the other Morgan poems on the National 5 exam list, '*Trio*' and the one called '*In The Snack Bar*' you'll see that he does sometimes describe characters in vivid detail, even though he chooses not to do so here.)

The character is not really introduced either. He just starts to speak, sits down, and keeps on talking. And yet, he feels very real. This is partly because of how realistically Morgan the poet renders this man's speech. We'll cover this idea later. But, it's also because the start of the poem is so vividly real that everything else in the poem seems real too. Morgan paints enough pictures in our head at the start for us to be able to paint the rest for ourselves.

Morgan also uses tense to create realism. By telling the whole poem in the **present tense** he creates what we call **immediacy**, a sense that the whole thing is unfolding in front of us as we look on.

The narrator

You may have noticed that we have been using the words "character" and "narrator". This might seem a bit surprising, as Morgan's own public statements about his poems suggest that the encounters in them really happened. But, we have to remember that Morgan is a poet. He shapes life into poetry.

We should not assume that the voice of a narrator is the voice of the poet. If you read a poem in which the narrator described killing a ninety-foot-long giant squid after a three-day-long battle in outer space, we would not assume the astronaut narrator was the poet, because we know that poem just couldn't be true. In general, we shouldn't ever assume that the voice of the narrator is the voice of the poet, even when the narrator describes an event in the city where we know the poet lived.

Some parts of the poem "belong to" the narrator. They come from his voice. Other parts come from the voice of the working man.

- Using the line numbers to help you, write a sentence or two in your notebook to say which parts of the poem come from the narrator's voice.
- Again using the line numbers to help you, write a sentence or two in your notebook to say which parts of the poem come from the working man's voice.

The narrator's language

You should have worked out that these are the narrator's only words:

*Three o'clock. The bus lurches
round into the sun . . .
he flops beside me*

and

*. . . The bus brakes violently,
he lunges for the stair, swings down – off
into the sun for his Easter eggs
on very
nearly
steady
legs.*

Everything else in the poem is a monologue by the working man.

- There are 5 **verbs** in the narrator's language. List them.

These verbs (especially if we include the adverb "violently" along with "brakes") all tell us about very **active and expressive** movement. Along with the real life detail we saw earlier, they are another way in which Morgan the poet brings the scene to life and makes us feel we can almost see it happening before our eyes.

The narrator's verbs also contrast with those of the other man, as we'll see later.

As well as this clever use of verbs, we can see other poetic techniques in what the narrator tells us at the end.

He uses **rhyme** of "eggs" and "legs". It's one of very few rhymes in the poem, and the only **rhyming couplet**, when two lines side by side rhyme with each other.

- Why do you think Morgan the poet saved this technique until the very end? How does it help give the poem an effective ending?

There is a carefully-chosen **layout**. The last line "on very nearly steady legs" is stretched out onto four lines of the page.

- Why do you think Morgan the poet laid the ending out like this? What does the shape of the lines suggest?

He **undermines** his own words. The description “*very nearly*” challenges the idea that the working man’s legs are “*steady*”.

The working man’s language

In contrast with the narrator’s short, but poetic, speech, the other man’s language might seem very unlike poetry. There are no similes or metaphors, no images or personification. Remember though that this man’s language is shown to us by being passed through the filter of Morgan the poet. There is technique here too, and it all means something.

First of all, Morgan the poet puts in **a detail we, the readers, need** to help us understand.

- Look at line 6. What do we learn? Why would the working man not need to say this to the narrator?

Next, Morgan makes careful use of **word choice** and of **repetition**.

ACTIVE LEARNING Read the poem again. It will help if you have your own copy to write on.

As you read the poem, circle every use each of these words:

see understand say/ saying mean

How many uses of each word did you find?

The repeated use of these words seems to suggest that the man really wants to be taken seriously. He’s trying hard to communicate. He wants to be understood and accepted. He does not want to be judged. We can find other evidence of this too.

- How does line 5 show his kindness?
- How do lines 10 and 11 show that he does not want us to judge or condemn his drinking?
- How does line 11 show that he wants to be understood?
- How does line 13 show his need to be accepted?
- How many dashes are there in the poem? Count them.
- What do the dashes suggest about the way the man talks?
- How do the dashes show us that the man wants to be understood?

ACTIVE LEARNING Discuss these questions in your group or with a partner and then share your answers with the class:

1. Why do you think this man starts talking to the narrator in the first place?
2. Why do you think he feels the need to explain that he's been drinking?
3. Why do you think he tells the narrator that he's going to buy Easter eggs?
4. Why do you think he stresses the fact that working people are ignorant and uneducated?

One reason the man may be doing all of this is because he can see that the narrator is "*an educated man*". He may feel very aware of their differences in social class, or in education. He certainly describes himself as "*bliddy ignorant*" and admits to not understanding the Easter story, which he thinks the narrator will be able to explain.

Some of his language does slightly support the idea that he might not be well educated. Sometimes he abandons an idea half-way through:

"He jist canny – jist hasny"

Sometimes he's quite ungrammatical:

"was he rose fae the dead like"

We already looked at the narrator's use of **active verbs**. We've also looked at the working man's repetition of certainly **carefully-chosen verbs**.

Quite a lot of those verbs make it look as if he is in control of the conversation. He seems to be telling the narrator how to act or what to think:

"see . . . ye understand . . . ye'll maybe think . . . ye see . . . see what I mean . . . you can tell me . . . know what I mean"

Actually though, these verbs are again showing us how much the man wants the narrator to listen to him and to understand him.

Morgan the poet also writes in such a way as to show us what the man's voice sounds like.

He puts across the man's Glaswegian **accent**. (Accent means the way in which words sound different if they are said by speakers who come from different places)

- How does Morgan do this?

He puts across the man's Scottish **dialect**. (Dialect means the way in which speakers who come from different places will use different words to mean the same thing.)

- Where does Morgan use dialect?

Interaction

When you first read it, the poem seems to have a short introduction and conclusion from the mind of the narrator, and then a monologue from the tipsy working man. You might almost think the two characters don't properly interact. Look again.

ACTIVE LEARNING There are a number of places in the poem where it seems that the narrator has said something, or done something, but doesn't tell us what that is. Work on these extracts. For each extract:

- A. Work out where exactly you think the narrator's words or actions might fit in.
- B. Work out either what you think the narrator said or what you think he did.

1. *he flops beside me – "right along Bath Street?
- Oh tha's right, tha's all right, see I've
got to get some Easter eggs for the kiddies.*

2. *ye'll maybe think it's a – funny day
to be celebrating – well, no, but ye see
I wasny working, and I like to celebrate
when I'm no working*

3. *But anyway tha's the way I look at it -
I'm no boring you, eh?*

4. *You're an educatit man, you can tell me -
- Aye, well. There ye are*

Incidentally, you should have noticed that the very last line quoted above, "Aye, well. There ye are" suggests the narrator gave an answer that the man thought was quite deep or clever. That answer was about the meaning of Easter.

Christian ideas in the poem

The title of this poem refers to a particular day on the Christian calendar, Good Friday. This is the day on which Jesus was crucified. The idea of Easter is picked up in the working man's mention of going to buy Easter eggs, and by his questions about the meaning of Easter in the second half of the poem.

If we look very closely, we can see other parallels. The opening words of the poem are:

*"Three o'clock. The bus lurches
round into the sun"*

The Bible story of Jesus death, as told by a writer called Matthew, says:

"From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice [. . . and] gave up his spirit".

"The ninth hour" here means about three in the afternoon, as the Jews of Biblical times counted their hours from sunrise. So, Morgan in his poem has his bus come out into the sun at the exact same time as the Bible story has the darkness ending and Jesus dying. It's a significant time, standing for the end of darkness and of Jesus' suffering.

You don't need to believe or agree with the Christian story of Easter to enjoy this poem. But, if you understand the Easter story, you will be able to appreciate the poem better – to see what Morgan as a writer is doing.

Christians believe Jesus, also known as Christ, was the son of God, in fact God choosing to live on Earth in human form. He lived a perfectly good life, taught people, performed miracles and finally died. Christians believe that Christ's death has the power to save everybody from their sins, from all the wrong things they have done in life. Those who believe in Jesus and put their faith in him are accepted by God and their sins are forgiven.

That's what Christians think.

- What does the working man in the poem think about the Christian Easter story?
- What does he think about Easter as a time of year? How does he celebrate it?
- The working man says the word "Christ" twice. Explain the two different ways in which he uses the word.

This gives us two different pictures of Easter, the one believed by Christians, and the one expressed by the man, who seems to have more questions than answers.

What is Morgan the poet saying about Easter?

Perhaps that Easter means different things to different people – the man’s celebratory drink and buying of eggs for his children is just as valid as any other way of marking it.

Perhaps that the church hasn’t done a very good job of explaining things, if the man doesn’t know “*what today’s in aid of*”.

Perhaps that the church isn’t good at reaching ordinary working people. The man in the poem says he’s “*bliddy ignorant*” about Easter. However Morgan the poet knows the story in enough detail to be able to refer in his opening lines to the detail about the darkness and the third hour.

ACTIVE LEARNING Look at the three “*Perhaps . . .*” boxes above. Which one do you agree with most? Why? Which one do you agree with least? Why?

It does seem that Morgan is questioning how much Christian beliefs and rituals are relevant in modern life. However he also shows that we still need something to celebrate. The working man celebrates having a day off work. The poem also, by mentioning the sun twice, at the start and at the end, celebrates spring.

The Christian story of Easter goes on to say that although Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried on Good Friday, that is not the end. On the Sunday morning he came back to life again. This event is called the resurrection. We can apply these ideas to the poem. We could say that the working man was somewhat “crucified” by drink, but that at the end of the poem he has his own “resurrection” back out into the sunshine.

Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through the material about "Good Friday" you should know the poem, and its techniques, very well. Here's a revision task.

ACTIVE LEARNING 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.

Technique	Evidence – quotation	Explanation of effect
title	<i>Good Friday</i>	First of several precise details to make the poem seem very real
realism	<i>right along Bath Street</i>	Use of few exact details early on makes the whole poem seem real and alive
present tense		Makes the poem seem immediate and engaging
Scottish dialect		<i>Continue yourself...</i>

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

- active, expressive verbs
- rhyme
- line layout
- undermining
- word choice
- repetition
- being ungrammatical
- accent
- Biblical references