

# Scottish Poetry Library

## IN THE SNACK BAR by Edwin Morgan

Resource by Jane Cooper

This poem, like '*Trio*' and '*Good Friday*', describes a real life encounter in an urban environment.

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

1. Have you ever done a random act of kindness for a stranger? Why did you do it? How did it make you feel?
2. Have you ever been in a position where you could have done something kind for a stranger, but you didn't? What stopped you acting?

**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. What happens in this poem?
2. Where does it happen?
3. Who is involved?
4. Why does this event happen?

**WARNING** Please note this poem should be in just three stanzas. (Starting at "*A cup capsizes*"; "*It is down two flights*", and "*Wherever he could go*". Any other breaks have just been caused by page breaks in this website. The starts of the stanzas have been labelled to help you remember this.

## **IN THE SNACK-BAR**

- St 1** *A cup capsizes along the formica,  
slithering with a dull clatter.  
A few heads turn in the crowded evening snack-bar.  
An old man is trying to get to his feet  
from the low round stool fixed to the floor. 5  
Slowly he levers himself up, his hands have no power.  
He is up as far as he can get. The dismal hump  
looming over him forces his head down.  
He stands in his stained beltless gaberdine  
like a monstrous animal caught in a tent 10  
in some story. He sways slightly,  
the face not seen, bent down  
in shadow under his cap.  
Even on his feet he is staring at the floor  
or would be, if he could see. 15  
I notice now his stick, once painted white  
but scuffed and muddy, hanging from his right arm.  
Long blind, hunchback born, half-paralysed  
he stands  
fumbling with the stick 20  
and speaks:  
'I want - to go to the - toilet.'*
- St 2** *It is down two flights of stairs, but we go.  
I take his arm. "Give me - your arm - it's better," he says.  
Inch by inch we drift towards the stairs. 25  
A few yards of floor are like a landscape  
to be negotiated, in the slow setting out  
time has almost stopped. I concentrate  
my life to his: crunch of spilt sugar,  
slidy puddles from the night's umbrellas, 30  
table edges, people's feet,  
hiss of the coffee machine, voices and laughter,  
smell of a cigar, hamburgers, wet coats steaming,  
and the slow dangerous inches to the stairs.  
I put his right hand on the rail 35  
and take his stick. He clings to me. The stick  
is in his left hand, probing the treads.  
I guide his arms and tell him the steps.  
And slowly we go down. And slowly we go down.  
White tiles and mirrors at last. He shambles 40  
uncouth into the clinical gleam.  
I set him in position, stand behind him  
and wait with his stick.  
His brooding reflection darkens the mirror  
But the trickle of his water is thin and slow, 45  
an old man's apology for living.*

*Painful ages to close his trousers and coat -  
 I do up the last buttons for him.  
 He asks doubtfully, "Can I - wash my hands?"* 50  
*I fill the basin, clasp his soft fingers round the soap.  
 He washes feebly, patiently. There is no towel.  
 I press the pedal of the drier, draw his hands  
 gently into the roar of the hot air.  
 But he cannot rub them together,  
 drags out a handkerchief to finish.* 55  
*He is glad to leave the contraption, and face the stairs.  
 He climbs, and steadily enough.  
 He climbs, we climb. He climbs  
 with many pauses but with that one  
 persisting patience of the undefeated* 60  
*which is the nature of man when all is said.  
 And slowly we go up. And slowly we go up.  
 The faltering, unfaltering steps  
 take him at last to the door  
 across that endless yet not endless waste of floor.* 65  
*I watch him helped on a bus. It shudders off in the rain.  
 The conductor bends to hear where he wants to go.*

**St 3** *Wherever he could go it would be dark  
 and yet he must trust men.  
 Without embarrassment or shame* 70  
*he must announce his most pitiful needs  
 in a public place. No-one sees his face.  
 Does he know how frightening he is in his strangeness  
 under his mountainous coat, his hands like wet leaves  
 stuck to the half-white stick?* 75  
*His life depends on many who would evade him.  
 But he cannot reckon up the chances,  
 having one thing to do,  
 to haul his blind hump through the rains of August.  
 Dear Christ, to be born for this.* 80

### Thinking through

- To show your basic understanding of what you have read, give each of the three verses its own title or heading.

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 what he might be trying to do here. We know already that he liked to, at least in some of his poetry, record real events. He once said he was interested in

*"the grit of the facts of the case"*

and we can see that happening here. *'In The Snack Bar'* is a gritty poem – its details feel exact and what he describes is not romanticised, not made to seem easy or happy. The details he uses to describe the cafe, the disabled man, and the encounter, feel exact and factual. This poem feels real in a much harder and sadder way than the ways in which *Trio* and *Good Friday* seem real.

<b>ACTIVE LEARNING</b> Find five details in the poem that seem realistic, but not pleasant.
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**LET'S GET TO WORK** As we study this poem we'll think look especially at how Morgan puts across the old man's situation, and how the poem and its techniques affect the reader.

To help us study it, we'll examine this long poem stanza by stanza.

### **Stanza 1 - "IN THE SNACK BAR . . . go to the – toilet."**

#### **Sound effects**

The opening words of the poem are "*A cup capsizes,*" and at the end of line 2 we are told that the sound it makes is "*a dull clatter*". That repetition of the two "**c**" sounds is **alliteration** – the sound effect technique where a writer uses two or more words close together that begin with the same sound.

Morgan is being very clever here. The letter C can make two sounds – a hard one that sounds like a K, and a softer one that sounds like an S. Morgan uses the hard sounds in "*cup capsizes*" and "*clatter*" because the cup makes a hard, clashing sound as it falls. He uses alliteration to grab our attention and make us focus on the sound, because in the snack bar it is the sound of the cup capsizing that grabs the narrator's attention and makes him focus on the old man.

Despite this noise, only "*a few heads turn*" to look at the disabled man, suggesting how little society sometimes cares for the most vulnerable.

## Reality

Morgan's use of **present tense** in the verb "*capsizes*" works the same way that this tense does in the other set text poems "*Trio*" and "*Good Friday*", making the poem seem very immediate and realistic.

He gives us a quick **description** in line 3 of, "*the crowded evening snack bar*" and there are other details to help us picture it. The tabletops are "*formica*" – easily wiped clean. This, and the fact there are no tablecloths, suggests it's the kind of café where the clientele are in the habit of spilling things. The old man's seat is "*a low round stool fixed to the floor*". Customers can't move the stools to get more comfortable.

If you can find a picture of a classic 1960s Glasgow Italian café, this might help you imagine Morgan's snack bar. It's not an unwelcoming place – he says it is "*crowded*" – but that very noise and busyness, and the fact that nobody can move the furniture out of the way, might make the environment more of a problem for the old man.

## The old man

The more we learn about the man, the more we see the difficulties of his situation. First we learn that he is "*old*", then that "*his hands have no power*", then that he has a "*hump*" that "*forces his head down*", and eventually that he is also "*blind*".

Each part of this description is full of technique. The phrase "*the dismal hump*" is what's called a **transferred epithet**. This is when a word (an epithet) that describes one thing is transferred across to describe another one. It is not actually the hump that is dismal: rather, the man's life has become dismal because of the hump.

The hump is also **personified** – given human qualities although it is not a living thing. We are told that it is "*looming*" over the old man, and that it "*forces*" his head down. The hump has more power than the man does. This power is **literal** – the man really cannot look up – but also **metaphorical** – he cannot keep his head up in the sense of being cheerful and positive, as you might tell the players in your team to keep their heads up.

The narrator goes on to use a **simile**, saying that the man is "*Like a monstrous animal caught in a tent/ in some story.*" This **dehumanises** him in two different ways. To say the man is like an "*animal*" makes him non-human. Calling him "*monstrous*" makes him seem not even natural, but somehow grotesque and gruesome. This dehumanising effect carries on when we are told that the man's face – the key aspect of any human being – is "*not seen*". When we are told that he is like an animal "*in some story*" he again seems unreal. "*Caught in a tent*" suggests of the sort of travelling circus that used to exhibit bearded ladies, giants and other so-called freaks.

Morgan uses **alliteration** again to draw our attention to the man's overcoat, telling us he "*stands in his stained beltless gaberdine.*" So, we know his clothes are both dirty and damaged, as is his stick: "*Once painted white/ but scuffed and muddy.*" These two details suggest that he lives alone, with nobody to care for him or help him. The fact that the stick is "*hanging*" shows us how vulnerable the man is: he does not seem to have the strength to use the one thing he has that might help him.

Another detail in the description goes from bad "*Even on his feet he is staring at the floor*" to worse "*or would be, if he could see.*" Not only is he physically disabled, he is blind too.

Morgan's **word choice** of "*sways*" and "*fumbling*" in this stanza emphasises the man's unsteady movement. His speech is unsteady too. The **dashes** in "*I want – to go to the – toilet*" show him hesitating as he talks. We can't be sure why he speaks like this:

- It may be that his disabilities affect his speech as well as his movement.
- It may be hesitancy brought on by nerves – it is hard to ask for help from strangers you cannot even see.
- It may be embarrassment – it is even harder for an adult to have to ask for help in going to the toilet.

Morgan sums the man up as "*Long blind, hunchback born, half paralysed.*"

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Find quotations in this stanza to prove each of the three details in the above description.

## **Stanza 2 - "It is down two flights . . . hear where he wants to go."**

### **Changing perceptions**

Stanza 1 gives quite an unsympathetic, inhuman, picture of the old man. He is described, even judged, only on the basis of his looks. We might get the impression from reading it that Morgan, or maybe his narrator, is not a very nice or sympathetic person. At the start of stanza 2 though, we get a better impression of our speaker when he tells us "*It is down two flights of stairs, but we go.*" He helps, despite the inconvenience of those "*two flights*". He joins himself to the old man by using "*we*". He willingly and helpfully makes human contact: "*I take his arm.*"

Our perceptions of the old man are challenged too. Stanza 1 made him sound helpless. Now we see that he can take charge and give instructions: "*Give me*

– *your arm – it's better.*" Perhaps it is easier for him to be confident like this with someone who has been kind enough to help him.

## The journey

Morgan's **word choice** makes a normally simple visit to the toilet seem like a complicated and dangerous mission, all because of the old man's disabilities. The fact they "*drift*" makes it sound as if they are both slow, and also helpless, and not in control of their movements, like a ship adrift at sea. The **repetition** in "*inch by inch*" shows how slowly they must go, and what tiny, careful steps they must take. The **simile** "*A few yards of floor are like a landscape*" emphasises how long it all seems to take.

A phrase in lines 28 and 29 is so important that it almost **sums up** the whole poem and everything Morgan is trying to do in this piece of writing:

*"I concentrate/ My life to his".*

The writer, or the narrator, becomes totally focussed on the old man, on what he needs, on how fast he can move. He so completely concentrates his life to the old man's that he almost starts to experience life as the old man does.

How do we know this? By the way Morgan uses **senses** in this part of the poem. Remember, the old man is blind and cannot use his sense of sight. You may have heard it said that if someone loses the use of one sense, their other senses become more heightened, sharper and more aware. This is what happens here as we get details from all the other senses.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Look again at lines 23 to 34, from "*It is down two flights*" to "*inches to the stairs.*" Find and quote details from this section to show Morgan using other senses. **HINT** Some of his word choice allows him to deal with more than one sense at the same time.

- Find 3 details for the sense of touch
- Find 3 details for the sense of hearing
- Find 2 things the narrator can smell

By the way, these sensory details also Morgan to keep adding to his realistic and increasingly vivid description of the snack bar.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** This is an optional task, and will work for you if you are a more visual learner, or if you enjoy drawing. Looking again at these lines 23 to 34, and also at the first three lines of the poem, draw the snack bar. Then label details of the scene with appropriate quotations from the poem.

As well as being time-consuming, their journey across the cafe is hazardous. There are many risks in these “*slow dangerous inches to the stairs.*”

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Quote details from “*I concentrate*” in line 28 to “*inches to the stairs*” in line 34. Beside each one, explain how this could be a danger to the old man. For example, he could slip and fall because of the “*slidy puddle from the night’s umbrellas.*” Try to find at least two more like this.

The phrase “*dangerous inches*” is an **oxymoron**, a pair of words whose meanings seem to clash and contradict each other. How can something as tiny as an inch be dangerous? The poet shows us here that it can for this old man.

There’s something sad about the journey across the café too. Morgan mentions “*voices and laughter*” which are things that the old man is left out of.

They reach the top of the stairs and have to work out how to get down them. The old man must be right-handed, as when the narrator puts the man’s right hand on the banister rail he has to take his stick away from him for a few seconds to do so. Morgan’s **word choice** of “*clings*” here shows that this is a scary moment for the old man. Then he gets his stick back, but has to use it with his left hand.

The **word choice** of “*probing*” shows how carefully he feels his way down. He needs two other sorts of help too, as the narrator both guides the man’s arm and also tells him the steps. Finally Morgan’s **repetition** in line 39, “*And slowly we go down. And slowly we go down.*” emphasises just how slow and repetitive that journey is, and how long it all takes.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** If you are working through this material with a class or group, head out to the nearest staircase. (You’ll need one with a handrail or banister on the right hand side as you head down.) Get one person to play the narrator and another to be the old man. Act out lines 35 to 39.

## The toilet

The toilet seems much cleaner and shinier than the snack bar above. The description here is of “*white tiles and mirrors*” and the “*at last*” reminds us how long it has taken them to get there. Morgan’s word choice creates a **contrast** here between the “*clinical gleam*” of the toilet and the old man, who is

described as “*uncouth*” and who “*shambles*” in an unsteady and untidy sort of way.

We can see the narrator here trying to be as helpful as possible when he tells us, “*I set him in position, stand behind him/ And wait with his stick.*” There is another **contrast** here: when the narrator describes how “*His brooding reflection darkens the mirror*” this makes the old man seem quite powerful, almost menacing. However this is followed by a “*but*” to change the direction of the idea and we are told that “*the trickle of his water is thin and slow/ an old man’s apology for living.*”

This all takes so long that it seems the narrator may be getting just a little impatient – we are told it takes “*painful ages to close his trousers and coat*” and that he “[*does*] up the last buttons for him” as if he can’t wait any longer. The old man may sense this impatience: the **word choice** of “*doubtfully*” implies he is not sure if it’s still all right to want to do something as normal as washing his hands after using the toilet.

Just in case we think the narrator isn’t being very nice at this point though, we see his **sympathy** for the old man increase. He does something for him: “*I fill the basin*”. He touches the old man – not just his coat sleeve as he did before but the man’s own skin: “*clasp his soft hands around the soap*”.

When he helps him to use the drier he “[*draws*] his hands/ gently into the roar of the hot air.” The **word choice** of “*contraption*” to describe the drier shows us that the speaker is now so much in sympathy with the old man (remember that very important quotation from earlier in the poem, “*I concentrate my life to his.*”) that he sees the drier the way the old man regards it, as a nasty, noisy, hard to understand bit of rather suspicious machinery.

The literal meaning of sympathy is to feel something with another person. That’s what Morgan does in this verse: he feels along with the man, and gets the reader to do so too.

## **The return journey**

Morgan’s **word choice** of “*face*” in line 56 tells us the return journey is yet another challenge for the man – the word suggests that they are confronting a difficulty.

We find the word “*climbs*” or its near equivalent “*climb*” used 4 times in lines 57 and 58. This **repetition** tells us how long the return journey up the stairs takes them.

We already saw one very important quotation in stanza one, “*I concentrate my life to his.*” That quotation sums up how the poem works: it gets us as readers to concentrate our lives to that of the old man, to tune in to his experience and

to sympathise with him. Now here at the end of stanza two we see that Morgan, or his narrator, has great respect for the man. This is summed up in a pair of lines that form another very important and useful quotation:

*"that one  
persisting patience of the undefeated  
which is the nature of man when all is said"*

If this poem has a message, if Morgan is using it to teach us something, or to share an idea with us, this is it, and he draws our attention to it to notice the message by using **alliteration** in "*persisting patience*".

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Look again at the lines quoted above. In your own words, explain what Morgan is saying about humanity as he puts across the message of the poem here.

There's a kind of **double repetition** in line 62, "*And slowly we go up. And slowly we go up.*" Not only is the same short sentence used twice within the line, but it also works as a near repetition of that other repetitive line, line 39, which we saw when they were coming down the stairs.

Morgan seems to **contradict** himself towards the end of the journey.

**ACTIVE LEARNING**

- Look at line 63. Explain how the old man's steps can be both "*faltering*" and "*unfaltering*"
- Look at line 65. Explain how the wasteland of the snack bar floor can be both "*endless*" and "*not endless*"

The narrator's journey with the old man is at an end. Other kind people take over as someone helps the man onto a bus and as the conductor "*bends to hear where he wants to go.*" The bus is as unsteady as the old man; it "*shudders*".

**Stanza 3 - "Wherever he could go . . . to be born for this!"**

Now that his encounter with the old man is over, Morgan, or perhaps his narrator, can reflect upon it, and upon his feelings about the old man and the life he must lead.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Read lines 68 to 72 from “*Wherever he could go*” to “*in a public place.*” Explain in your own words what Morgan has learned about the way the man’s disabilities affect his life.

The sentence “*No one sees his face*” has both a **literal** meaning and a **metaphorical** one. No one **literally** sees his face because his hump forces him to bend towards the ground. **Metaphorically** speaking, no one sees his face in the sense that nobody gets to know him, no one (or at least so Morgan thinks) truly comes close to him.

Morgan then reflects on the effect the old man’s appearance has on others. “*Does he know how frightening he is in his strangeness/ under his mountainous coat, his hands like wet leaves/ stuck to the half-white stick?*” There’s another **contrast** here: the use of “*mountainous*” makes him sound imposing and powerful, very different to the weakness of his wet and leafy hands.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Morgan **sums up** the man’s predicament: “*His life depends on many who would evade him/ But he cannot reckon up the chances/ having one thing to do/ to haul his blind hump through these rains of August.*” Put this into your own words to show you understand what the poet is saying about the old man’s way of life.

In the above quotation we see another use of **transferred epithet**. It is not the hump that is “*blind*” but the man himself, just as, in stanza one, it was not the hump that was actually dismal but the man’s life.

The poem ends with an exclamation of sympathy and pity, a mixture of anger and compassion: “*Dear Christ, to be born for this!*” This line is the third of the really important quotations for you to learn to help you understand and explain the poem. The first was important in showing how the poem, and the experience described in it, works to make the reader feel sympathy. The second was important for explaining Morgan’s overall message. This third quotation gives us Morgan’s overall response to the old man, and to the way he must live.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** In your own words, explain what Morgan is feeling and saying here.

This is a good moment to take stock of your work on this poem.

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Using appropriate quotations from the poem to help you prove:

1. that Morgan feels pity or sympathy for the old man
2. that Morgan feels admiration or respect for the old man
3. that Morgan feels angry that the man must live his life this way

**ACTIVE LEARNING** Here again are the three key quotations, one from each stanza:

- 1     *"I concentrate my life to his"*
- 2                                     *"that one  
persisiting patience of the undefeated  
which is the nature of man when all is said"*
- 3     *"Dear Christ, to be born for this!"*

Making sure that you use each of these quotations at some point, and using any others that you feel are helpful when you need to, write a mini essay in answer to this question:

What is Edwin Morgan saying in his poem 'In The Snack Bar', and how does he say it?

### Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through the material about "In The Snack Bar" you should know the poem, and its techniques, very well. Here's one more 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. The first two boxes have been filled in for you.

Technique	Evidence – quotation	Explanation of effect
Alliteration of hard C	<i>"A cup capsizes along</i>	The hard C sound draws our attention and makes

sound	<i>the formica</i> "	us focus on the old man, just as the hard sound in the café makes Morgan pay attention and focus on the old man.
Word choice	"A few heads turn in the crowded evening snack bar"	Though there are many people, few pay attention to the man – this shows society's lack of care for its vulnerable members.
present tense		Makes the poem seem immediate and engaging
Transferred epithet		<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:

deal separately with the connotations of each of these words: *formica, few, crowded, tent, sways, hanging, fumbling, we, drift, clings, probing, doubtfully, gently, contraption, face the stairs, shudders*

realistic details

present tense

personification

alliteration of hard c sounds, st sounds and p sounds

two different uses of transferred epithet

dashes

two different similes

oxymoron

repetition of inch, climb(s) and two repetitions of whole sentences

use of the senses of hearing, touch and smell

three different uses of contrast

exclamation

two examples of phrases with both literal and metaphorical meanings

two different examples of the writer seeming to contradict himself

