

Scottish Poetry Library

TRIO by Edwin Morgan

Resource by Jane Cooper

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

1. What's the best present anyone ever gave you for Christmas?
2. What's the best present you ever gave someone else for Christmas?

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?

TRIO

*Coming up Buchanan Street, quickly, on a sharp winter evening
a young man and two girls, under the Christmas lights -
The young man carries a new guitar in his arms,
the girl on the inside carries a very young baby,
and the girl on the outside carries a chihuahua. 5*

*And the three of them are laughing, their breath rises
in a cloud of happiness, and as they pass
the boy says, "Wait till he sees this but!"
The chihuahua has a tiny Royal Stewart tartan coat like a teapot-
holder,
the baby in its white shawl is all bright eyes and mouth like
favours in a fresh sweet cake, 10*

*the guitar swells out under its milky plastic cover, tied at the neck
with silver tinsel tape and a brisk sprig of mistletoe.
Orphean sprig! Melting baby! Warm chihuahua!
The vale of tears is powerless before you.
Whether Christ is born, or is not born, you
put paid to fate, it abdicates
under the Christmas lights. 15*

*Monsters of the year
go blank, are scattered back,
can't bear this march of three.
- And the three have passed, vanished in the crowd
(yet not vanished, for in their arms they wind 20*

*the life of men and beasts, and music,
laughter ringing them round like a guard)
at the end of this winter's day.*

Thinking through

Write down everything you know about the story of the Nativity – what Christians believe happened around the time of the birth of Jesus.

LET'S GET TO WORK As we study this poem we'll think look especially at how Morgan conveys this scene, including the three characters and what they are carrying. We'll go on to examine how he uses these to put across an idea. Throughout all of this, we'll see how this poem can be compared to "Good Friday", which you will also find on this website.

Morgan did not divide the poem into verses. However, to help us study it, we're going to break it down into four sections.

Section 1 - The title to the end of line 8: "TRIO . . . sees this but!"

The title, TRIO, has a **denotation**, a basic, straightforward, dictionary meaning. At the most basic level it just means three of something, in this case the three people the narrator sees.

However the title also conveniently suggests three things. These are the **connotations** of the word – the ideas that the word suggests and sparks off for us when we read it.

1. It suggests three people playing music together in a small group. This idea fits this poem because there's a musical instrument in it, the guitar the young man is carrying. The idea of music goes with the general mood of happiness and celebration in the poem.
2. We'd hope that a group playing music together will be in harmony with each other. This ties in with the idea that the three people in the poem are in harmony with each other, that they have a close and loving relationship. By the end of the poem, the narrator uses these three characters to celebrate the possible harmony and togetherness of the whole human race.
3. The three people in the poem may suggest the three kings or three wise men from the Nativity story.

Morgan brings the poem to life straight way by using **realistic details**, and by writing in **present tense**. (He does this in "Good Friday" too, and also in another of the set poems, "In The Snack Bar".)

- A. List 6 details we know from the first 2 lines of the poem.
- B. List all the present tense verbs Morgan uses from the title to line 8.

The **opening line** of the poem sounds a little negative. We are told that it is "winter", that the weather is "sharp", and we know it must be dark as Morgan says it's "evening". This might suggest to us that the poem is going to be a negative one. But it's not. The poem is so happy and positive that it stands as a contrast to that opening line. This might suggest two possible ideas:

Perhaps that Morgan is saying we can find happiness in all sorts of unexpected or unlikely places.

Perhaps that Morgan himself, or his narrator, was feeling rather negative before he saw the three young people, but that seeing them really cheered him up.

Morgan uses **repetition** in these lines:

- A. How often does he use the word "young"?
- B. How often does he use the words "girl" or "girls"?
- C. What effect does he get from repeating these words?
- D. How often does he repeat the word "carries"?
- E. What effect does he get from repeating that word?

Morgan uses the **connotations** of one word in particular. He tells us the three young people are "*under the Christmas lights*". In this phrase, "*under*" suggests that the people are being watched over and protected. This idea of safety and protection is one we will keep coming back to as we study the rest of the poem.

This word "*under*" gives us another idea too. At Christmas we put lights on the tree and we put presents under it. If the young people are under the lights, Morgan is saying that, even though one of them is carrying a present, they themselves also are presents. They are a gift to him because they made him feel so joyful and hopeful.

The "*Christmas lights*" in this part of the poem may be a **symbol** – something that is really there in the poem but also stands for another idea. If the three young people stand for the three wise men from the Nativity story then the lights Morgan sees in Buchanan Street may also stand for the star the wise men followed as they took their gifts to the baby Jesus. If you're not convinced, this may help: just like the kings or wise men, each one of these people in the poem is carrying something precious.

There are lots of **suggestions of fragility** in this part of the poem. The guitar is not in a proper musical instrument case. The baby is very young and therefore in need of protection. A chihuahua is a very tiny sort of dog.

Morgan also makes careful **word choice** of "*cloud*". The trio's breath "*rises in a cloud of happiness*." The cloud suggests their togetherness because it joins their breath together. The actual, real warmth of their breath compared to the cold air is visible as a real, **literal** cloud of vapour. This cloud also has a metaphorical meaning: it shows us the **metaphorical** warmth between them, their bond of friendship that keeps them together.

Lastly in this section, Morgan uses **Glaswegian dialect** to increase the sense of the poem happening in a real place.

- Quote the line in which this dialect is used
- Explain how you know this is Glaswegian dialect.

Section 2 - Lines 9 to 11: "The Chihuahua . . . sprig of mistletoe."

In just three lines of the poem, Morgan packs in an incredible amount of detail. This tells us how important these lines are to him.

ACTIVE LEARNING You'll need three sheets of A4 paper. In the middle of the first sheet, draw the chihuahua as it is described in these lines. In the middle of the second sheet, draw the baby as it is described in these lines. In the middle of the first sheet, draw the guitar as it is described in these lines. Under each picture, write the line of the poem that goes with it.

As you work through the material about these lines, annotate your drawings with notes to help you remember and understand what you have learned. There's going to be a lot of detail, and this will help you keep track

We've noticed already that the baby, the guitar, and the dog are all **fragile**. Now we see however that they are all **safe**.

- What protects the Chihuahua? How do we know it is loved and cared for?
- What protects the baby? How do we know it is loved and cared for?
- What protects the guitar? How do we know the young man is proud of it?

Let's look at the three descriptions in more detail.

The **chihuahua** is a lovely mixture of foreign and Scottish. It's a Mexican breed of dog but its tartan coat is very Scottish. So, the dog may be there to show that Morgan believes in a Scotland where foreigners are welcome and can become part of our nation. The little dog might also be there to remind us of the animals in the nativity story, who gathered round the baby Jesus in the manger.

There's a nice contrast between the dignity of the "*Royal*" tartan and the silliness of the "*teapot holder*", like something your granny might have. The teapot holder also makes us think of warmth and care.

The **baby** gives us another connection to the Christian Nativity story, reminding us of the baby Jesus. The "*white*" colour of the shawl (and probably of icing on the cake too) has connotations of innocence and purity, which are very special qualities.

The baby's "*bright*" eyes tell us it is alert, interested in the world and excited about it. This is a lovely positive thing in itself, but it also fits with a poem in which the writer is very alert to what he sees in the world, and feels very positive about it.

The baby's eyes and mouth are said to be "*like favours in a fresh sweet cake*". The words "*fresh*" and "*sweet*" both have very positive connotations. If the cake has favours – little hidden treats – in it, then it is most likely a wedding cake or a Christmas one. Both of these usually have white icing, going back to the idea of innocence and purity. A wedding cake celebrates love and the start of an important new phase of life. A Christmas cake is usually shared with people we love, our family and friends. If you got a favour in your slice of cake it would be a nice surprise, just as seeing these three young people and the things they are carrying is a treat and a surprise for Morgan.

The **guitar** "*swells out*" under its cover. This suggests that the young man carrying it is swelling with pride because he knows he's chosen a wonderful present that will make someone very happy.

The "*milky*" colour of the cover ties in with the idea that babies live on milk. Milk is something natural and very nurturing.

The "*silver*" colour of the tinsel tells us the guitar is being treated as something precious and valuable. This is not because of how much it might have cost, but because of the happiness it will bring.

The "*mistletoe*" makes us think of love, and the description of the sprig as "*brisk*" suggests life and energy that ties back in with all the ideas earlier in the poem about youth and newness.

You should also have noticed that these three lines about what the people are carrying are the longest three lines in the poem. Morgan does not break them up or shorten them because he wants to show that love, happiness and generosity should not be restricted.

Section 3 - Lines 12 to 18: "Orphean sprig! . . . march of three."

In the first line here Morgan uses three **exclamation marks**. It's as if he's almost shouting out with joy. Seeing this everyday, even slightly comical, scene gets him celebrating life. It's so uplifting that he feels optimistic.

The poem shows that we can find real happiness in very ordinary things, even in things we have only seen and not actually experienced: Morgan is only watching these people, he is not one of them. It also shows us what good poets do – they look at life in a special way and find the poetry in it.

The poet uses an **allusion** to the Greek myth of Orpheus. An allusion is when a writer refers to something he expects his readers to recognise and understand.

Orpheus was a poet and musician. He was so talented that he could charm all living things, and even inanimate things like stones, with his music. When his lover Eurydice got trapped in Hades, the ancient Greek version of Hell, Orpheus led her back out from the underworld by getting to follow the music from his lyre (a kind of small harp).

So, when Morgan calls the sprig around the guitar “*Orphean*” he is saying music has the power to charm us, and even to lift us out of Hell.

There’s humour in this line too. Aren’t “*Melting baby!*” and “*Warm chihuahua!*” just quite funny phrases?

Morgan’s next phrase, “*The vale of tears*” is another **allusion**, this time one that has become a well-known phrase, and which originally came from a hymn. The vale of tears means all the problems and troubles that are an unavoidable part of human life. The hymn says that only Jesus can help people cope with the vale of tears. Morgan however says that the sprig, the baby, and the dog, have enough joyful power to defeat the vale of tears.

This ties in with the note of doubt in the next line. It’s Christmas, but Morgan, or his narrator, isn’t totally sure about what to believe.

- Quote the words that show us this uncertainty.
- How does this remind us of some lines in “Good Friday”? Quote those lines again.

This lack of sureness doesn’t matter, because Morgan is so sure of the power of the sprig, baby and chihuahua. His **word choice** shows us this. He says fate “*abdicates*”. This is a word that is only ever used about kings and queens, powerful and important people. To abdicate is to completely and utterly give up your power, to step down and know you can never step back up again. It also something the king or queen decides to do willingly. (If they are forced out of power, we would say they had been deposed.) Fate, faced with these three things, just decides to give up, to surrender all its power.

This is supported by his **line layout** too. In “Good Friday” we saw how the layout of the last few lines suggested the working man’s unsteady legs. Now Morgan gets his line to look like this:

*Whether Christ is born, or is not born, you
put paid to fate, it abdicates
under the Christmas lights.*

The line itself almost abdicates, gives up and walks away.

Morgan goes on to make the baby, the sprig and the dog seem almost magical or supernatural because they defeat “*monsters*”. This part of the poem again goes in threes. He talks about the “*march of three*” and the monsters give up in three ways: they “*go blank*”, they “*are scattered back*” and they “*can’t bear*” it.

The word “*march*” has two meanings. We call this **ambiguity**, which means that we have to keep both meanings in our head at once because the poet does not tell us that one is more right than the other. It makes us think of an army marching, which shows us how powerful these three are. But a march is also a kind of music, which ties in with the idea of a musical trio, and the fact that one of the three things being carried is a guitar.

Section 4 - Line 19 to the end: "- And the three . . . this winter's day."

These lines begin with a **dash**. Did you even notice it? This dash is in fact the end of a **parenthesis** that began with an earlier dash at the end of line 2. Did you notice that one? In between these dashes we see the three young people and the things they are carrying.

There are two reasons Morgan encloses this main section of the poem in dashes.

1 The dashes **enclose** the whole encounter. They remind us how brief Morgan's sight of the trio is. In fact, he probably spent much less time looking at them than it takes us to read about him looking at them.

2 The dashes **protect and surround** the trio. They are powerful, but because joy is so rare in this world they should be protected as something precious.

There is another **parenthesis** in this last section of the poem, this time one made by the use of **brackets**. You'll find it in lines 20 to 22:

*(yet not vanished, for in their arms they wind
the life of men and beasts, and music,
laughter ringing them round like a guard)*

Once again the parenthesis protects these words. Very cleverly, this time the words are actually *about* protection. We are told that their laughter is "*like a guard*". It is also "*ringing round them*" which is another example of **ambiguity**. The laughter is "*ringing*" in the sense that it makes a ringing sound, it rings out. The laughter also surrounds them, goes around them in a ring, again protecting them. We might even see a hint of a wedding ring here, just like we saw a hint of a wedding cake earlier.

This bracketed parenthesis also gives Morgan a chance to contradict himself. He's just told us in line 19 that "*the three have passed, vanished in the crowd*". But now he tells us they have "*not vanished*". They may be lost in the crowd but their effect on him is lasting. We know it lasted because he went away and eventually wrote a poem about it. People are still reading that poem nearly 50 years later. The trio certainly have "*not vanished*".

So what can we say about this poem overall. What is Morgan’s message? Try this for size:

Human life and love are special and sacred, with or without religion.

ACTIVE LEARNING Copy the above statement down in the centre of a sheet of paper. Around this, give all the proof you can find to back up this statement. Your evidence might be quotations from the poem or notes in your own words.

Technique revision

Now that you’ve worked your way through the material about “*Trio*” 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. The first two boxes have been filled in for you.

Technique	Evidence – quotation	Explanation of effect
title	<i>Trio</i>	Means three people together but also has connotations of being in harmony with each other and ties in with ideas about music in the poem
realism	<i>Coming up Buchanan 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
symbol		Continue yourself...

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:

For a grid about “*Trio*” you need to work with the following techniques:

deal separately with the connotations of each of these words:
under, cloud, white, bright, favours, fresh, sweet, cake, swells, milky, silver, mistletoe, bright, abdicates

repetition of *young* and *girl(s)*

repetition of *carries*

negative-sounding first line

Glasgow dialect

ideas of fragility

ideas of safety and protection

very long descriptive lines

exclamation marks

humour

allusion to the myth of Orpheus

allusion to the Nativity story

allusion to hymn words

ambiguity of *march*

ambiguity of *ringing*

parenthesis made of dashes

parenthesis made of brackets

line layout on page

You should also make sure that you finished annotating your drawings of the three long descriptive lines with all your notes about them.