

# Scottish Poetry Library

**WINTER by Edwin Morgan**

**Resource by Jane Cooper**

This poem deals with the natural environment.

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

1. What is your favourite season of the year? What do you like about it? How does this season make you feel?
2. What is your least favourite season of the year? What do you dislike about it? How does this season make you feel?

**Meeting the text**

- As you read the poem for the first time, circle every use of these words: *go/ goes, fade(s), decay(s)*
- How would you describe the mood or atmosphere of this poem?

## **WINTER**

*The year goes, the woods decay, and after,  
many a summer dies. The swan  
on Bingham's pond, a ghost, comes and goes.  
It goes, and ice appears, it holds, 5  
bears gulls that stand around surprised  
blinking in the heavy light, bears boys  
when skates take over, the swan-white ice  
glints only crystal beyond white. Even  
dearest blue's not there, though poets would find it.  
I find one stark scene 10  
cut by evening cries, by warring air.  
The muffled hiss of blades escapes into breath,  
hangs with it a moment, fades off.  
Fades off, goes, the scene, the voices fade  
the line of trees, the woods that fall, decay, 15  
and break, the dark comes down, the shouts  
run off into it and disappear.  
At last the lamps go too, when fog  
drives monstrous down the dual-carriageway  
out to the west, and even in my room 20  
and on this paper I do not know  
about that dead grey pane  
of ice that sees nothing and that nothing sees.*

**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 one particular technique that underpins this whole poem.

### **Pathetic fallacy**

Have you ever watched a rom-com type film in which the happy ending was bathed in sunshine? Or a horror movie with the scary scenes set in darkness? Or a drama when the human conflict took place in a storm? All of these movie clichés are examples of the **pathetic fallacy**.

This technique, used in media and in writing, means using weather or nature – including seasons – to suggest and reinforce human emotion. There are many famous examples of this in literature.

- In *Macbeth*, the first time the central character meets the witches who are going to manipulate him into foully murdering the king, the weather is “foul” and stormy. On the night Macbeth kills King Duncan there is a terrible storm.
- In most film versions of *Frankenstein*, Victor uses the drama and chaos of a thunder and lightning storm to dramatically bring his monstrous creature to life
- In Robert Browning’s poem *Porphyria’s Lover*, the narrator describes a storm as spiteful and destructive, just before he spitefully destroys an innocent young woman by murdering her

Morgan could have chosen to write a happy poem about winter by focussing on how the sunlight twinkles on sparkly frost. Similarly, a poet could write an unhappy poem about summer by homing in on how plants shrivel up in the merciless sun, or on how streams become parched and dry.

In writing ‘*Winter*’, Morgan makes a conscious decision: he uses the more negative aspects of the season to create a poem in which the overall mood is a sad and regretful one.

### **Narration**

Like ‘*Good Friday*’, ‘*Trio*’, and ‘*In The Snack Bar*’, which are also on the National 5 set text list, this poem has a **first person narrative voice**. Like all those poems on the set text list, *Winter* is told in **present tense**.

The tense here gives a sense that the scene is unfolding and developing before our eyes. We can observe what is happening, but cannot influence it. The narrator too is just an uninvolved observer, as we’ll see in our study of the poem.

**LET'S GET TO WORK** As we study 'Winter' we'll think look especially at how Morgan's language creates a particular picture of the season, making us see it in a certain way. Although the poem is not divided into stanzas, we'll divide it into three sections for our detailed examination.

### **Section 1 - The title to "poets would find it" in line 9.**

This poem feels quite negative from the start. The first three **verbs** are "goes", "decay" and "dies", and there are **repeated** uses of "goes" at the end of line 3 and start of line 4.

Morgan's other **word choice** emphasises this bleak mood. His **metaphor** of the swan as a "ghost" ties in with "dies" and is reinforced by *alliteration* with the **g** sound in "goes". Although only one "year" is going in line 1, "many a summer dies" in line 2, so we are losing a lot more than we ever had.

When so much that is good is going, dying, or decaying, what we get back in return is not much compensation. The swan, ghostly at best, eventually goes and, in return, "ice appears, it holds". The ice survives and holds on when other warmer, livelier things like woods, summer and the swan do not.

The ice "bears gulls" which at least are alive, but are not as gracious and beautiful as the swan. And, they don't feel sure of the ice – they "stand around surprised" by the sheer oddness of being able to stand on water they'd normally be floating in.

Morgan shows the gulls "blinking in the heavy light". "Heavy light" is an **oxymoron**, a figure of speech when two words that contradict each other are used together. It's a good description of the quality of daylight you can see in winter, when the sky seems low and brooding, but it also has an unsettling effect, emphasising the surprise of those gulls who cannot quite trust or understand the ice.

This isn't a static scene we are watching, but a scene that is changing over time in front of our eyes. First the ice "appears", then it "holds" strongly enough to support gulls, then it is strong enough to bear the weight of "boys". There is **alliteration** here with four uses of the **b** sound in lines 5 and 6 to draw our attention to another unsettling effect. Although these boys are the first human life in the poem, they don't seem fully alive. It is not them who is in charge of their actions; instead their "skates take over".

There seems to be a **contradiction** in the way the ice is pictured here. In line 7 it is said to be "swan-white" but in line 8 it "glints only crystal beyond white". The colour has gone. It is as if Morgan creates that first, positive colour, then pulls back from it again.

This first scene of the poem (though remember, Morgan does not divide it into sections or stanzas) ends on another description that it is really about not having something to describe: "Even dearest blue's not there". Something that is "dearest", that is loved and valuable, is "not there".

The writer does say "*poets would find it*", but this is odd too. Morgan IS a poet, and we ARE reading a poem, but he seems to be **denying** this. It's as if the winter is so bleak that it has depressed him and drained the poetry out of him, so that he cannot see things as a poet normally sees them.

## Section 2 - Lines 10 to 17: "I find . . . disappear."

Line 9 ended by saying "*poets would find*" the missing "*dearest blue*". Now line 10 begins by telling us what this speaker, who is denying being a poet, finds: "*one stark scene*". The **word choice** of "*stark*" tells us what we are meant to think of what we see – we are meant to view this scene as barren, bleak and desolate.

Although the poem has a **first person narrator**, we don't know this until the writer uses "*I*" at the start of line 10, which is almost half way through the poem. Like making the boys seem less active than their own skates, this is another way that humanity is made to feel unimportant in the poem.

The first 9 lines used a number of colour words, therefore referring to the sense of sight. This second section of the poem introduces another sense, **sound**. These sounds are often not pleasant. The scene is "*cut by evening cries*". The **word choice** of "*cut*" suggests violence, and though "*cries*" could just mean shouts, it makes us think of someone crying and being upset or hurt. This negative connotation is backed up by the phrase "*warring air*" in line 11, which again suggest violence and conflict.

Lines 12 and 13 almost seem to be describing a death, as breath fades away:

*"The muffled hiss of blades escapes into breath  
hangs with it a moment, fades off"*

"Fades" here is another **negative verb**, like the uses of "*goes*" and "*decay*" we saw earlier. It is also **repeated** twice more in line 14 to emphasise this negativity, and we find "*goes*" used again in line 14 and "*decay*" in line 15.

- **ACTIVE LEARNING** Skim read the rest of this section of the poem, down to the end of line 17.
- How many more negative verbs can you see? List them.
- For each one you found, write yourself a note to explain how this verb has negative connotations in the way it is used here.

This is the point where humanity leaves the poem. First the "*voices fade*" in line 14 as the boys seem to skate further away. Then in lines 16 and 17:

*"the dark comes down, the shouts  
run off into it and disappear"*

The darkness here seems to be more powerful than the children. It feels deliberate as it “*comes down*” and the boys become not people but just noises, “*shouts*”, who disappear into it.

This poem has had a swan, some gulls, and a group of skating boys, but they are all gone now. The only living thing we seem to have left is the “*woods*” in line 15, but they are decaying, falling and breaking, hardly full of life.

### **Section 3 - Lines 18 to 23: “At last . . . nothing sees.”**

The first two words of line 18 seems to introduce a **summing up**. “*At last the lamps go too*”. Even artificial, human attempts at creating light have been defeated.

Light, which is always a **metaphor** for something positive, has gone. In its place we have “*monstrous*” fog. We have also left the world of nature behind and now are now driving “*down the dual-carriageway*” and “*out to the west*”. The idea of “*the west*” here has **connotations** of a place that is unknown or unexplored, even lawless or dangerous: think of explorers heading into the west, or shoot-outs in the wild west.

We end up in a very small space, “*in my room/ and on this paper*”. This is the second, and last, time that the narrator speaks in a personal way, but what he says suggests that he feels vulnerable and helpless. He is in his room and writing on paper, admitting that he is a writer after all, so he should be the expert. He should be in command of his situation but instead he tells us “*I do not know.*”

What doesn't he know?

“*about that dead grey pane  
of ice that sees nothing and that nothing sees.*”

This is an odd thing for him to say. He does know about the ice, because he described it for us earlier in the poem. He just does not seem to feel that he has got to grips with it, or engaged with it, perhaps because it is “*dead*” and like a man-made “*pane*” of glass rather than like something natural.

The ending is very **nihilistic**. This means that it is bleak, that it is interested in nothingness (we see the word “*nothing*” repeated within the final line.)

## The poem overall

Actually the whole poem is full of nihilism – things keep dying, decaying and disappearing. Our senses are turned down as if they were controlled by some sort of volume dial with first colour and then sound fading away.

We could say that *Winter* is a nature poem about death, not what we might usually expect a nature poem to be about.

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

- **ACTIVE LEARNING** This is a very visual and descriptive poem. You'll need 3 sheets of A4 paper. We have looked at the poem by breaking it up into three sections.
- For each of these, draw and colour a picture of what Morgan describes.
- Now label details in your pictures with quotations from the poem

**ACTIVE LEARNING** This is also a poem in which the sense of sound is important. Imagine you were going to make a film of *Winter*. List the sound effects you would need to use.

## Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through the material about *Winter* you should know the poem, and its techniques, very well.

**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
denial	<i>"dearest blue's not there, though poets would find it"</i>	Morgan seems to be denying that he is a poet, which shows how much this bleak scene seems to have depressed him  <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 expressions:  
*dearest, stark, cut, cries, warring, monstrous, the west, dual-carriageway, dead, pane*

repetition of: *go/ goes, fade(s), decay(s), nothing*

alliteration of g sounds and of b sounds

pathetic fallacy                      sense of sound                      1<sup>st</sup> person

present tense                              2 metaphors                              oxymoron

contradiction                              denial                                      negative verbs

summing up                              nihilism

## THE SCOTTISH TEXT QUESTIONS

First, re-read *Winter* and answer these questions:

1. Show how any two of the poet's uses of word choice effectively contribute to the main ideas or concerns of the poem. **4**
2. Show how any two of the poet's uses of sound effect techniques effectively contribute to the main ideas or concerns of the poem. **4**
3. How effective do you find any two aspects of the last six lines as a conclusion to the poem? Your answer may deal with ideas and/ or language. **4**

The last question is worth 8 marks and needs a much bigger answer. If you want to get 5 marks or more for the 8-mark final question, you **MUST** compare this poem to two other poems.

You can, if you wish, tackle this as a kind of mini essay. It's also possible to approach this question by giving a set of bullet pointed answers that all fit together to form a complete response.

Here's the question:

- 4 With close textual reference, show how the ideas and/ or language of this poem are similar to another poem or poems by Morgan that you have read. **8**

When you have written your answers, give them to your teacher to mark.