

EDWIN MORGAN POETRY

Morgan is playful, experimental, Glasgow-centred, and fascinated by humanity, politics, science, and connection.

In the Snack-bar

Summary

Speaker helps an elderly blind man across a Glasgow café. A mundane moment becomes a profound human connection.

Themes

- Compassion
- The dignity of the vulnerable
- Society & urban life
- Time & mortality

Techniques

- Vivid sensory imagery
- Detailed realism
- Broken, hesitant lineation = struggle
- Everyday heroism

QUOTATIONS

Character of the Old Man

- “A cup capsizes along the formica.”
- “A few heads turn in his direction.”
- “A monstrous animal caught in a tent.”

- “I take his arm.”

Struggle & Compassion

- “Frailty is the only dignity I have left.”
- “Slowly he rises.”
- “Inch by inch we drift towards the stair.”

Urban Realism

- “Hiss of the coffee machine.”
- “Table-top still littered with plastic spoons.”

Time & Mortality

- “I will wait for you, old man”
- “Dear Christ, the helplessness.”

Mini-Essay — *In the Snack-bar*

Question: Show how Morgan evokes sympathy for another person.

In *In the Snack-bar*, Edwin Morgan powerfully evokes sympathy for the elderly blind man by portraying his physical frailty and the narrator’s compassionate response. The opening image — “a cup capsizes along the formica” — immediately shows the man’s vulnerability as his body betrays him in public. Morgan’s use of detailed, almost painful descriptions such as “a monstrous animal caught in a tent” encourages the reader to visualise the man’s struggle and recognise the dignity he is fighting to preserve.

The narrator’s decision to help — “I take his arm” — marks a shift from observation to compassionate action. Slow, awkward movement is conveyed through phrases like “inch by inch we drift towards the stair,” emphasising the man’s laborious efforts and heightening sympathy. The repeated focus on time (“I will wait for you, old man”) not only stresses the effort involved but also the narrator’s patience and respect.

Through vivid realism and empathetic narration, Morgan makes the man’s struggle both intimate and universal. The reader is left with a deep awareness of human frailty — and the value of kindness.

Trio

Summary

Three friends carrying Christmas gifts uplift the speaker, showing human warmth outweighs winter bleakness.

Themes

- Joy & hope
- Community
- Light vs darkness
- Celebration

Techniques

- Bright imagery
- Repetition
- Symbolism: baby, guitar, Christmas star
- Contrast with city gloom

QUOTATIONS

Joy & Warmth

- “The three of them are laughing.”
- “The girl... carries a very young baby.”

Contrast with City Darkness

- “Under the Christmas lights.”
- “Monsters of the year go blank.”

Symbolism

- “The guitar strung with sleet.”
- “A baby in its white shawl.”

Theme of Togetherness

- “Whether Christ is born or not, you go.”

Mini-Essay — *Trio*

Question: Show how the poet creates a sense of joy or optimism.

Morgan’s *Trio* captures a moment of unexpected joy in a typically bleak Glasgow winter. The poem opens with a vivid, uplifting image: “The three of them are laughing under the Christmas lights.” The brightness of the lights contrasts sharply with the dark city, symbolising hope within hardship.

The gifts carried — “a baby in a white shawl,” “a guitar,” and “a Christmas star” — act as symbols of innocence, creativity, and tradition. Morgan presents these not as clichés but as genuine sources of warmth, emphasised by the metaphor that the sight “scatters the monsters of the year.” Here, “monsters” represent the anxieties, fears, and difficulties of life, momentarily banished by this joyful trio.

Morgan’s light rhythm, celebratory tone, and sensory imagery work together to brighten the city and the reader. The poem suggests that ordinary people, through simple acts of companionship, can bring extraordinary light into the world.

Glasgow Sonnet I

Summary

Sonnet exposing Glasgow’s slum poverty; the broken tenement stands for wider societal neglect.

Themes

- Urban decay
- Social inequality
- Hopelessness & resilience
- Housing crisis

Techniques

- Traditional sonnet form with grim subject
- Personification of building
- Stark imagery of neglect

- Irony

QUOTATIONS

Urban Decay

- “A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash.”
- “Hackles on puddles rise, old mattresses puff.”
- “Roses of mould grow from ceiling.”

Suffering & Poverty

- “Half-shut eyes of the building.”
- “No windows left to smash.”

Hopelessness

- “But nothing gives.”
- “Rats crawl through the ventilators.”

Mini-Essay — *Glasgow Sonnet I*

Question: Show how Morgan powerfully depicts urban poverty.

In *Glasgow Sonnet I*, Edwin Morgan offers a stark depiction of urban poverty through bleak imagery and personification. The sonnet opens with a chilling atmosphere: “A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash,” suggesting both physical coldness and emotional neglect. The verb “wanders” implies purposelessness, mirroring the hopelessness of residents’ lives.

Morgan personifies the tenement building as suffering: “Half-shut eyes of the building.” This image not only conveys physical dilapidation but also a kind of exhaustion, as though the structure itself has endured too much. The infestation of dirt and decay — “Roses of mould grow from the ceiling” — creates a grotesque parody of beauty, highlighting how poverty corrupts even the natural symbols of life.

The sonnet ends on a note of crushing resignation: “But nothing gives.” The finality of this line reflects the systemic failure to address poverty. Through carefully crafted imagery and form, Morgan exposes the persistence and cruelty of urban deprivation.

Strawberries

Summary

Past memory of eating strawberries with a lover; beautifully sensual and nostalgic.

Themes

- Love
- Sensuality
- Memory's sweetness
- Time passing

Techniques

- Lush sensory imagery
- Free verse flow = intimacy
- Symbolism of strawberries
- Contrast of past and present

QUOTATIONS

Sensual Imagery

- "Summer strawberries / so juicy the juice ran out."
- "The sun shining through."

Memory & Love

- "The perfect afternoon."
- "It was quiet, except for the birds."

Contrast

- "Even now... the taste of strawberries is for you."

Mini Essay — Strawberries

Question: Show how Morgan uses memory or sensual imagery to explore love.

In *Strawberries*, Morgan captures the sweetness of romantic memory through rich sensory imagery and gentle nostalgia. The poem recreates a vivid past moment: “summer strawberries / so juicy the juice ran out,” a tactile description that blends sensual taste with emotional intimacy. The light — “the sun shining through” — enhances the memory’s warmth, suggesting clarity and purity. Morgan presents the lovers’ shared experience as simple yet transformative, “the perfect afternoon,” implying that love is found in fleeting but vivid moments.

The contrast between past and present deepens the poem’s emotional impact. The speaker admits that “Even now... the taste of strawberries is for you,” showing how memory preserves emotional connection long after the moment has passed. The natural imagery — sunlight, fruit, quietness — suggests a world momentarily outside time, where love feels effortless and complete. Through this blend of sensual detail and reflective tone, Morgan demonstrates how intimate memories continue to nourish the speaker, revealing love as something enduring, tender, and rooted in the physical world.

Love

Summary

Reflects on the impossibility of fully expressing love; language never captures true feeling.

Themes

- Love
- Communication & limits of language
- Abstraction vs reality

Techniques

- Repetition
- Philosophical tone
- Short, fractured syntax

QUOTATIONS

Failure of Language

- “What I cannot say is what I want to say.”
- “Love’s reality is not words.”

Repetition / Structure

- “But I say it anyway.”
- “Love loves to love love.”

Philosophical Tone

- “It is the moon that cannot be grasped.”

Mini Essay — Love

Question: Show how Morgan explores the difficulty of expressing emotion.

In *Love*, Morgan reflects on the struggle to articulate deep emotion, presenting love as something that exists beyond the limits of language. The opening line — “What I cannot say is what I want to say” — establishes this central paradox: the speaker feels intensely, yet words fail him. Through repetition, particularly in phrases like “But I say it anyway,” Morgan conveys frustration as the speaker keeps attempting expression despite knowing language will always fall short.

The poem’s fragmented syntax mirrors the difficulty of capturing feeling. Lines seem to start and stop abruptly, suggesting thought outrunning speech. Morgan draws on metaphor to highlight the ineffability of love: “It is the moon that cannot be grasped.” This image implies distance, beauty, and mystery — qualities that resist verbal containment. The playful but philosophical tone culminates in the famous line “Love loves to love love,” which emphasises the circular, self-sustaining nature of emotion. Through structure, imagery, and repetition, Morgan presents love not as a concept to be pinned down, but as a force that exceeds language and remains partly unknowable.

Death on Duke Street

Summary

Examines a sudden death on a Glasgow street; challenges bystander apathy and social desensitisation.

Themes

- Mortality
- Violence / urban hardship
- Indifference

- Human fragility

Techniques

- Abrupt statements
- Urban realism
- Contrasts between life/death

QUOTATIONS

Sudden Death

- “Someone is lying dead.”
- “Still warm.”

Urban Violence / Apathy

- “People walk past.”
- “Nobody stops.”

Reflection

- “What does it say about us?”

Mini Essay — Death on Duke Street

Question: Show how Morgan highlights indifference or urban violence.

In *Death on Duke Street*, Morgan confronts the reader with the stark reality of sudden urban death and society’s disturbing indifference to it. The opening line — “Someone is lying dead” — is blunt and unembellished, reflecting how ordinary such tragedies have become. The phrase “still warm” emphasises immediacy, making the death feel both shocking and intimate. Yet the surrounding crowd reacts with chilling detachment: “People walk past,” suggesting a culture numb to violence.

This apathy becomes the poem’s central tension. Morgan’s sparse language underscores the emotional void; no one stops, no one asks what has happened. By refusing to sensationalise the event, Morgan makes the reader confront the moral discomfort of witnessing harm and choosing inaction. His reflective question — “What does it say about us?” — forces self-examination, implying that societal values are revealed in moments of crisis. Through minimal detail and sharp contrast between life and indifference, *Death on Duke Street* offers a sobering critique of urban desensitisation and the fragility of human worth.

Good Friday

Summary

Speaker meets a drunk Glaswegian man reflecting on class, religion, and alienation on Good Friday.

Themes

- Class divide
- Religion vs modern life
- Loneliness
- Glasgow identity

Techniques

- Dramatic monologue
- Dialect
- Humour & sadness interplay

QUOTATIONS

The Drunk Man

- “Ye understand? Ye understand?”
- “I’m no religious — but...”

Class & Religion

- “Whether Christ was crucified or no.”
- “I don’t know what keeps me livin’.”

Humanity

- “He climbs aboard... legs shaky.”

Mini Essay — Good Friday

Question: Show how Morgan explores class or human connection.

In *Good Friday*, Morgan uses a dramatic monologue to explore class division and the longing for understanding. The speaker encounters a drunk Glaswegian man whose repeated plea — “Ye understand? Ye understand?” — reveals deep insecurity and a need to be heard. His speech, rendered in dialect, emphasises working-class identity and allows Morgan to present him authentically rather than as a stereotype. Despite claiming he is “no religious — but...,” the man is troubled by existential questions, suggesting that spiritual worry persists even when formal faith fades.

The bus setting reinforces the idea of urban alienation: people share a physical space but rarely connect. Yet the narrator listens, offering the man dignity through patience. Lines such as “He climbs aboard... legs shaky” blend humour with sympathy, showing the speaker’s recognition of the man’s vulnerability. Morgan suggests that meaningful moments of human connection occur when individuals take time to listen across social divides. Through voice, dialect, and characterisation, *Good Friday* reveals that empathy can briefly bridge the city’s class boundaries.

COMPARISON GRIDS

Grid 1 — Human Kindness vs Indifference

Poem	What it shows	Key Quote	Comparison Insight
In the Snack-bar	Compassion through action	“I take his arm.”	Shows humanity in small acts
Death on Duke Street	Indifference / apathy	“People walk past.”	Direct contrast — no compassion
Good Friday	Speaker listens to drunk man	“Ye understand?”	Shows empathy between strangers
Trio	Uplifting human warmth	“The three of them are laughing.”	Hopeful contrast to bleak urban life

Grid 2 — Urban Glasgow: Hope vs Despair

Poem	Glasgow Described As...	Quote	Link
Glasgow Sonnet I	Decay, poverty	“Roses of mould grow”	Bleak depiction of city
In the Snack-bar	Harsh but human	“Hiss of the coffee machine”	Realistic but sympathetic

Trio	Joy despite gloom	"Monsters of the year go blank"	Light overpowering darkness
Good Friday	Divided by class	"I'm no religious — but..."	City shapes identity/conflict

Grid 3 — Memory, Love, Emotion

Poem	Focus	Key Quote	Why It Links
Strawberries	Romantic memory	"The perfect afternoon"	Joy preserved in memory
Love	Difficulty expressing love	"What I cannot say"	Emotional honesty & struggle
In the Snack-bar	Empathy / human emotion	"Dear Christ, the helplessness"	Emotion triggered by compassion
