

In the Snack Bar

Morgan uses the small, realistic scene of a disabled man needing help in a snack bar to talk about the following larger themes and ideas.

Isolation

The poem shows that, despite the fact that he's in a crowded snack bar, the old man's pain and disability cuts him off from other people.

At the end, Morgan writes: 'No one sees his face' – this is both literal (his face is perpetually bowed down) and figurative (people don't see him as an individual, they only see his illness).

Our attitude to sickness

The people around the old man seem to be ignoring him – only 'a few heads turn' when he spills the cup.

Hearing vividly about the old man's struggle is unpleasant for us as readers too. Morgan is showing that we don't like thinking about sickness and infirmity, and will avoid doing so if we can.

Altruism/human contact

The passive onlooker begins to help the old man in the second stanza. He 'concentrates' his life to the old man's, and this forces him to experience what the day-to-day struggle of life is like for the old man. Helping someone can be difficult, because it forces us to imagine their pain.

Sickness and disability

Morgan explores the physical pain and difficulties severe illness brings with it; he also explores how people react to sickness.

Good Friday

Morgan uses the small, realistic scene of meeting a drunk stranger on a bus to talk about the following larger themes and ideas.

Religion

Morgan establishes the religious theme quickly with the title and lines 1-2: Good Friday is the day Christ was crucified; he died at three o'clock; and the sun came out when he died.

The working man's lack of knowledge about the details of Easter could be a result of Scotland's increasingly secular (non-religious) society.

The working man is on a quest to get Easter eggs for his kids – this shows that Easter is more and more about things that haven't anything to do with the religious story.

Class divides in society

The working man recognises that the narrator is an 'educated' man, and so believes there is a division between them. He believes that, as a member of the working class, he is incapable of being properly educated. He seems to show some self-hatred about this.

This shows that class divisions can be damaging to people's education and to their view of themselves.

Trio

Morgan uses the small, realistic scene of seeing three strangers on Buchanan street at Christmas to explore the following larger themes:

Religion and religious doubt

The three people are each carrying something precious as they pass under Christmas lights, just as the three wise men carried gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus as they followed a star. They are a modern, secular version of a religious image.

The joy the three people share is described as being strong enough to overcome 'the vale of tears' (what the Bible calls the struggles and pains of life) – according to Christianity, only following Christ is supposed to be able to do this.

Morgan then further explores this theme when he says 'Christ is born, or is not born' – this shows that Christian faith is neither necessary for joy nor more important than the love and happiness the three people represent.

Joy, love, and happiness

The three people are clearly very happy, and all the details Morgan gives us about them build on this sense of joy and love.

Joy is described as something capable of defeating darkness – 'the monsters of the year' (the struggles and pains which life brings) are 'scattered back' by the three people.

When they have gone from the narrator's sight, the narrator is left with a memory of their joy, even though they have vanished.

The poem shows us that joy and love are precious and rare: the entire poem is about a very quick glimpse of a happy family on a cold winter's night, and the baby, guitar, and Chihuahua are all fragile.

Hyena

In this poem, Morgan gives voice to a hyena so that it can deliver a dramatic monologue. Through this, Morgan explores the following ideas.

Nature's harshness and ugliness

Throughout this poem, the hyena makes a point of how connected it is to its environment, particularly when it directly compares itself to Africa. It also talks at length about the horrible things it does: waiting for things to die or be injured; feasting on the dead; 'laughing'; looking to kill. It is characterised as a threatening and cruel creature. Morgan does this to show that nature is not simply 'good' – there are a lot of extremely unpleasant things about it.

Death

The hyena presents itself as a representative – or servant – of death. Its repetition of 'I am waiting for you'; its threats to the listener; its association with night and darkness; its eating of the dead lion – these are all reminders that every living thing, no matter how powerful or clever, will die.

How we present ourselves

This is a dramatic monologue, so we do not need to take the hyena's word for granted. We can interpret it as a frightening figure of death, or we can interpret it as a poser who is trying to intimidate the listener.

Slate

In this poem, Morgan uses a description of Scotland's physical formation to explore ideas about nature, Scotland's people, and time.

Scotland

This poem was written as a response to the 1979 referendum on creating a Scottish Assembly (a step towards a Scottish parliament). Despite most voters voting Yes, the government decided that a majority of the whole population had to vote yes for the decision to be valid. This poem shows Morgan dealing with his disappointment and frustration.

The poem depicts Scotland's landscape as resilient, tough, and battered by outside forces – this is a metaphor for the idea of Scotland as a nation.

The poem's narrators are (really!) generally assumed to be extra-terrestrials. Morgan does this to suggest that Scotland is important.

Time and change

Most of the poem describes the physical formation of Scotland's landscape, a process that took hundreds of millions of years. Morgan does this to show that important change is slow – reminding himself and disappointed readers that the failed referendum is not the end of their ambitions. Compare the beautiful, lasting landscape to 'the sorry glory of a rainbow' – the first is ancient, the second – however pretty – lasts only a few minutes.

The power and violence of nature

Throughout this poem, the violence of nature is portrayed. Morgan does this to show that the beauty and glory of our environment is the end result of dramatic and violent natural processes.

Humanity is mentioned only briefly in the poem. This is to show that we're only a tiny part of the natural world and its processes.

Winter

In this poem, Morgan uses a description of the changes that the winter season brings to explore the idea of death, decay, and vulnerability.

Death and decay

This poem focuses on the idea that everything fades away and decays – look how often the words 'decay', 'fade', 'go', or 'die' are used. The winter the poem describes is a metaphor for death. Morgan does this to show that everything is subject to this process of change – everything breaks down and fades away.

Human weakness and limitations

Twice in the poem Morgan makes a point of illustrating his inability to do something. Describing a winter scene, he says 'dearest blue's not there, but poets would find it'. This suggests that our memories and imagination can still bring back things we have lost. Despite this, Morgan is a poet, and he can't bring back 'dearest blue'.

At the end of the poem he says that even 'on this paper' he does not know about 'that dead grey pane'. As a poet, Morgan is in his element when he talks about 'on this paper'. However, he still can't make sense of death.

Man-made technology – the lamps - and buildings – his room - are also shown to be unable to keep out winter.

Nature

The poem shows how all of nature – the plants, the people, the animals - is subject to death.