Scottish Poetry Library

GLASGOW, 5 MARCH 1971 by Edwin Morgan

Resource by Jane Cooper

Getting In

Before you read the poem, do these things:

1. Find out what the word "*Instamatic*" means.

2. Consider this: if you saw someone being harassed or attacked in a public place, what do you honestly think you would do?

Meeting The Text

You are about to read an Edwin Morgan poem. It describes a scene, creating a picture with words.

Read the poem through two or three times. Once you feel you have a grasp of what Morgan is showing us, draw a picture of the scene he describes. Put your drawing in the middle of a large sheet of paper. Then use appropriate lines from the poem as labels for the details in your drawing.

Instamatic

Glasgow 5 March 1971

With a ragged diamond
of shattered plate-glass
a young man and his girl
are falling backwards into a shop-window.
The young man's face   5
is bristling with fragments of glass
and the girl's leg has caught
on the broken window
and spurts arterial blood
over her wet-look white coat.   10
Their arms are starfished out
braced for impact,
their faces show surprise, shock,
and the beginning of pain.
The two youths who have pushed them   15
are about to complete the operation
reaching into the window
to loot what they can smartly.
Their faces show no expression.
It is a sharp clear night   20
in Sauchiehall Street.
In the background two drivers
keep their eyes on the road.

Let's Get To Work

As we study this poem, we'll look especially at how Morgan creates a clear picture of a shocking event. We'll work through the poem step by step, with teaching and commentary. **Key techniques** will be picked out in **bold** and there will be short questions for you to answer.

The Title

Rather unusually, this poem has two titles

The first one is:

> *Instamatic*

The word "*Instamatic*" was a brand name created by the Kodak photography company during the 1960s. Instamatic cameras were cheap, easy to load with film, and easy to use.

Morgan wrote 54 Instamatic poems, which were published in 1972.   This is how he explained the idea behind them:

> " I began . . . writing short poems which were directly about events which I had either read about or seen in newspapers or on television. So it's a poetry which is very closely related to real life in that sense, but I gave myself the kind of restriction that the poem must be presented in such a way as to give a visual picture of this event, whatever it was, as if somebody had been there with an Instamatic camera and had just very quickly snapped it . . ."

So, Morgan's **word choice** of "*Instamatic*" as his first title tells us he is trying to give a snap shot picture of an event, as if we are seeing it all happening in one moment. The poem is like a photograph.

The second title is

> *Glasgow 5 March 1971*

All Morgan's Instamatic poems are titled this way, with a place name, and a date. This title seems very precise: we know not just the city but the exact day. It gives the poem **realism**, a sense of being anchored in reality. This **realism** will be invoked again and again throughout the poem, as Morgan's details bring a disturbing event vividly to life.

The very exact and factual nature of this title also makes it sound like something official: it could almost be a police report rather than a poem.

The poem

This poem has no stanza breaks: it is meant to be printed in one long, skinny, block.

> Q1 Why is having no breaks a suitable layout for this Instamatic kind of poem?

For ease of study, we are going to think about in chunks, but do remember that Morgan didn't divide the poem up in any way.

Lines 1 – 4

These lines form the first sentence of the poem:

> "With a ragged diamond
> of shattered plate-glass
> a young man and his girl
> are falling backwards into a shop-window."

The first line contains an **oxymoron**, two words whose ideas clash and don't really go together. The word "*diamond*" suggests something very neatly and precisely cut and shaped, while "*ragged*" suggests rough, careless, jagged tearing. The clash of ideas makes **oxymorons** striking and unsettling, so this use of the technique here tells us immediately that something is wrong.

That phrase *"ragged diamond"* is a **metaphor** for the broken glass surrounding the falling couple.

Q 2 What does this **metaphor** tell us about the glass?

The **word choice** here also does something else. It implies what sort of shop window the young couple have been pushed through.

Q3 What kind of shop do you think this is?

Q4 Why might this young couple have been looking into this particular window together?

In the next line:

"of shattered plate glass"

Morgan uses a lot of soft –s- sounds, a technique called **sibilance**. He does this to suggest the sound of the glass landing inside the shop window display in thousands of tiny shards and splinters.

We have to wait for line 3 to find out who is involved here:

"a young man and his girl"

There are three pairs of people in the poem, and this is the first pair. Morgan's **word choice** of *"his"* might suggest that the young man is protective or caring towards his girlfriend. Sadly however, he is unable to protect her from this horrible experience.

Line 4 gives us the first verb in the poem. The young people *"are falling"* into the window.

Q 5 What **tense** is Morgan using here?

Q 6 How does this choice of tense add to the sense of **realism** in this poem?

The **word choice** here of *"falling"* tells us the people are not in control of their actions. We might decide to jump; we never decide to fall. At best, a fall is an accident. As we'll find out later in the poem, this fall is something worse.

Lines 5 – 14

In the next group of lines we find out how the fall through the window is affecting and endangering the two young people:

"The young man's face
is bristling with fragments of glass"

The **word choice** of *"bristling"* suggests stubble, or a beard.

Q 7 What does this tell us about the amount of broken glass?

We begin to see the horrible consequences of this attack. The young man may end up badly and heavily scarred. Facial injuries like this can be life changing: they immediately affect the way other people see the scarred person. What is happening here and now in the poem may affect how other people will react to this man for the rest of his life.

Next we see what is happening to the girl:

> *"and the girl's leg has caught*
> *on the broken window*
> *and spurts arterial blood*
> *over her wet-look white coat."*

The **word choice** of *"caught"* here tells us her leg has snagged on the breaking glass as she falls, causing another potentially very serious injury.

> Q 8 What function do your arteries carry out in your body?

The mention of the girl's *"leg"* tells us she has probably damaged her femoral artery, one of the body's major blood vessels. A wound here is a real and immediate risk to her life, as it could cause sudden and major blood loss. This is backed up by Morgan's **word choice**.

> Q 9 What does the word *"spurts"* suggest about the blood?

This blood is pouring onto the girl's *"wet-look white coat"*. *"Wet-look"* tells us the fabric of the coat is designed to look shiny and slick. Now it doesn't just look wet, it actually is wet, soaked by the girl's own blood. And, because the coat is *"white"* the blood will stand out with shocking clarity, creating a strong **contrast** with the colour of her garment.

The poem catches the two young people mid-fall:

> *"Their arms are starfished out*
> *braced for impact,"*

> Q 10 What does the **word choice** of *"starfished"* tell us about the way the couple are positioned?

Look back at the drawing you did when you first read the poem. Did you get the body shapes right?

This would be an instinctive reaction. If you fell suddenly backwards, this is exactly what you'd do to brace yourself and limit the impact. But it won't do them any good. They are only falling a couple of feet at most. It's not how far they are falling that will hurt them; it's the fact that they have already crashed through a glass window, and the broken glass has already harmed them, as we saw above.

The poem now zooms in to **describe their expressions**:

> *"their faces show surprise, shock,*
> *and the beginning of pain."*

As we read this, we sympathise with these two victims. We see their emotional and physical feelings, and know that this is just the split-second *"beginning"* of something that will get, and feel, much worse.

Up to this point in the poem, the key issue is how violence affects the victims. The poet has, so far, focused on the *"young man and his girl"*.

The remainder of the poem focuses on other characters, allowing Morgan to look at how some people treat their fellow human beings.

Lines 15 – 18

In line 4, we were told the young people were *"falling"*. That might have suggested an accident. Now, for the first time, we learn the reason for the fall:

> *"The two youths who have pushed them*
> *are about to complete the operation*
> *reaching into the window*
> *to loot what they can smartly."*

We meet the second pair of characters in the poem: *"two youths"*.

> Q 11 Why have the youths pushed the couple through this window?

The **word choice** of *"youths"* for young men reminds us of police statements, or newspaper reports. It's a word almost used to imply young suspects or criminals.

They may be criminals, but they are organised and focussed. As they reach past their victims to *"complete the operation"* the youths seem totally unconcerned about the harm they've done. They treat the couple as objects, using them as a convenient battering ram to break through the jeweller's window. The **word choice** of *"smartly"* backs this up, suggesting a quick, efficient approach. It's chilling how business-like they appear to be, given that they are cold-bloodedly injuring two innocent people just to grab what they want.

To emphasise this cruelty still further, Morgan tells us:

> *"Their faces show no expression."*

There's a **contrast** here with the surprised and shocked faces of the young couple in line 13. This total lack of empathy or compassion should make us feel shocked and angry that two human beings could treat others as objects in this destructive way.

We can sum up the actions of the robbers as being uncaring and heartless.

Lines 20 – 23

So far this photographic poem has had quite a narrow focus, concentrating on what is happening in the shop window.

Now we realise that that is just the centre of a wider picture, as Morgan shows us what is going on around that focal point.

> *"It is a sharp clear night*
> *in Sauchiehall Street."*

The **word choice** of *"sharp"* does two jobs here. Firstly, it adds to the **realism** of the poem by telling us about the temperature on this early-March evening. Secondly, it reminds us of the jagged glass, and the cuts inflicted on the two victims.

> Q 12 How does Morgan's mention of the street name also add to the poem's realism?

Now we meet the third and last pair of characters:

> *"In the background two drivers*
> *keep their eyes on the road."*

That **word** *"background"* does two things. It reminds us we are seeing the scene as if it were a photograph, with a foreground and a background. It also tells us the drivers are deliberately keeping out of this.

Remember, we've just been told it's a *"sharp clear night"*. Visibility is good. There is no way the drivers can pretend that they have not seen what is happening. They are choosing to ignore this violent attack, to drive on by without getting involved.

We can sum up the actions of the drivers as being uncaring, not because they are actively cruel and heartless, but because they are indifferent: they don't seem to care.

At this point, we as readers probably feel angry and disgusted with the attackers, and now angry and deeply disappointed with the drivers.

But think back to that question you were asked to consider before you read the poem. If you saw someone being harassed or attacked in a public place, what do you think you would do? It is very easy just to condemn the drivers for staying in *"the background"* and not getting involved, but Morgan wants us to consider whether we would act differently. Be honest: having seen how heartlessly violent the robbers are, would you want to step in?

Bringing it all together

Although the poem gives us a picture of the event as it actually happens, it's told in third person, not first person "*I*". So it doesn't feel like an eye-witness report. It's more matter of fact, more objective and disconnected. Apart from the description of the two victims' faces, there are no emotions in the poem.

Despite all this, the poem does arouse our feelings as we read it, as the event is describes is so shocking.

Technique revision

Now that you've worked your way through all the work on '*Glasgow 5 March 1971*' you should know the poem very well. It's time to revise your knowledge of Morgan's techniques.

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 as examples.

Point – a technique	Evidence – quotation	Explanation of effect
Title + word choice	*Instamatic*	Makes the poem seem like a split-second snap shot of an event
Title	*Glasgow 5 March 1971*	Gives the poem a sense of reality, and makes it seem almost like an official report *Continue yourself…*

You can carry on the rest of the table yourself. You'll need a whole sheet of paper, maybe two, as you need to add the following techniques:

Give **each** of these examples of word choice a separate row on your table: *Instamatic; diamond; his; falling; bristling; leg has caught; arterial; spurts; wet-look; starfished; beginning; youths; complete the operation; smartly; sharp; sharp clear night; background;*

Give **each** of these metaphors a separate row on your table: *ragged diamond*;

Take **two** separate rows on your table to deal with **two different examples** of contrast

realism   oxymoron   sibilance

present tense   description of facial expressions

third person