

Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish Literature and Language

“... solitary but cheerful in Anniesland ...”

Aspects of Edwin Morgan

The purpose of these notes is to suggest ways in which the chosen texts may be explored by students in S4 to S5 groups who are studying literature and language courses. The assignments are not designed to be practice examination questions at Certificate levels. We believe that selectively used they offer interesting and worthwhile ways of engaging with the texts.

The texts chosen are by the major Scottish poet, Edwin Morgan: “A City”, “Sonnets from Scotland” and “A Third Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries”. They illustrate different aspects of the recent work of this versatile and wide-ranging poet. The first two of the chosen works are to be found in the collection *Edwin Morgan: New Selected Poems* (Carcanet, 2000). The third poem is in *Sweeping Out the Dark* (Carcanet, 1994), but the complete text is provided here for convenience.

1. THE POET OF THE CITY

The text of “A City” is to be found in *Edwin Morgan: New Selected Poems* (Carcanet, 2000), p. 163.

(a) Possibly you have read other poems by Edwin Morgan, such as “King Billy” or “In the Snack-Bar”. Both of these poems are about life in Glasgow, and are only two of many poems that Edwin Morgan has written about his home city. Try looking through the book of *New Selected Poems*, or some other collection containing poems by Morgan, to find more poems about Glasgow or about life in the city. Glasgow itself, or places in Glasgow, does not have to be mentioned by name for the poem to be picked out by you. Make a list of the poems you and other students find, and add a little note to each about the subject of the poem and what Morgan seems to think about the subject and about the city. Is Morgan optimistic and cheerful, or pessimistic and bitter? Perhaps his feelings are mixed, or neither of these extremes.

(b) Read “A City” and make some short notes for yourself under the following headings, as you think about the questions:

Which City?

What clues do you find to the identity of the city as Glasgow? (There may be more than place names for you to note).

The Form of the Poem

Who are the speakers in the poem? You will see that there are two of them having a dialogue about the city. Mark the different pieces of speech for each speaker as if the poem were a play. What can we learn about each speaker from what is said?

The Situation of the Poem

How is the city being observed? Is it seen directly, or in some other way? What are the clues to the idea that this is not the real city itself?

RANGE:

- S4+ Literature and Language courses

KEY TEXTS:

- *Edwin Morgan: New Selected Poems*: (Carcanet, 2000)
- *Sweeping out the Dark*: (Carcanet, 1994)

RECOMMENDED:

- *Scotnote: The Poetry of Edwin Morgan*: Thomson, Geddes (ASLS, 1986)
- *Scotnote: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid*: Riach, Alan (ASLS, 1999)
- *Teaching Scottish Literature*: MacGillivray, Alan (EUP, 1997)



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(c) Individually or in pairs tackle some of the following questions about the text:

Why should a film about Glasgow be seen as an 'epic'? What does this word tell us about Morgan's attitude towards his own city?

What is Morgan intending to suggest by saying that some parts of the film were shot in Moscow and other parts in Chicago? Is he thinking only about the appearance of the city? If not, what qualities or historical aspects associated with Moscow or Chicago might he be thinking of? A reading of other poems by Morgan might help you in this, such as "**King Billy**" (*New Selected Poems*, p. 29) and "**Glasgow Sonnets**" (*New Selected Poems*, p. 82).

How important are the children in the Glasgow of the poem? To help you in thinking about this, try reading another poem by Morgan, "**To Joan Eardley**" (*New Selected Poems*, p. 25).

What feature of Glasgow of the past is Morgan suggesting in the statement "...rigging was best against it, gone now, don't regret it..."

What kind of event does the reference to "marchers, banners, slogans" bring to your mind? What different purposes might such an event have?

(d) To conclude your work on the poem, work in pairs on the preparation of a reading of the poem to the rest of the class, with each of you taking the part of one speaker. Try to suggest the nature of each speaker and the tones they use in the dialogue.

2. THE POET OF SCOTLAND

The texts used here are a selection of the "**Sonnets from Scotland**" (*New Selected Poems*, pp. 130–151). See also *Teaching Scottish Literature* (ed. Alan MacGillivray, Edinburgh University Press), Exemplar 33, pp. 136–137.

(a) Preparation: *Edwin Morgan and Science Fiction*

Find examples of science or space poems written by Edwin Morgan. In *New Selected Poems*, there are "**In Sobieski's Shield**" (p. 41), "**From the Domain of Arnheim**" (p. 44), "**Thoughts of a Module**" (p. 68), "**The First Men on Mercury**" (p. 69), "**Spacepoem 3: Off Course**" (p. 70), "**Memories of Earth**" (p. 87), "**Stargate**" poems (pp. 104–114), and "**Planet Wave**" (pp. 169–179). Space is a major theme in Morgan's poetry. He has always shown an interest in science fiction topics, being excited by the possibilities of science and space travel. A common situation in his poetry is that of visitors from another planet. This can be seen in several of the above poems, for example, "**From the Domain of Arnheim**" and "**Planet Wave**", with their central idea of unseen observers from another world looking on at the lives of humanity in different ages.

Now try to apply this to Morgan's major sequence of sonnets, "**Sonnets from Scotland**", as you read and work through individual poems from the work.

(b) Read the first sonnet, "**Slate**". Note the time period of the poem, the geological formation of what we call Scotland. The poem covers a vast stretch of time before the human era. So who are the 'we' of the sonnet?

Read the second sonnet, "**Carboniferous**". Note the theme of vigorous new life in an unspoiled world, an 'Arcadia'. It is a perfect natural world, yet it contains creatures that might inspire fear in humans if they were there. The Latin quotation, 'I also am in Arcadia', suggests that even in an apparently perfect world there is the presence of possible evil. Find out about the Bearsden Sharks. What is the force referred to in line 12? What further information do we gain about 'we', the observers?

(c) Read the sonnet, "**Pilate at Fortingall**". Discuss the story that is suggested. There is an old tradition in Scotland that Pontius Pilate originally came from Fortingall in Perthshire.

(d) Read a number of the sonnets dealing with famous people in history or literature, e.g. Kentigern, Damian, Lady Grange, James Hutton, Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas de Quincey, Gerard Manly Hopkins, etc. Find out about them, and any Scottish connection, and discuss why Morgan has devoted sonnets to them.

(e) Read the sonnet, "**North Africa**". Identify and find out about the Scottish poets mentioned in the poem. Try to find a poem about the Second World War by each of them.

- (f) Find three or four sonnets that show images of different possible futures for Scotland. These futures may be either fortunate or unfortunate, optimistic or pessimistic. Find more than one of each kind.
- (g) Read the sonnets, “**After a Death**” and “**The Poet in the City**”, which deal with Edwin Morgan himself. What do they tell us about the poet’s nature and the sources of his poetry?
- (h) The last sonnet, “**The Summons**”, deals with the departure of the alien observers. Why are they reluctant to go? What are their feelings for Scotland and its people? What do you think Morgan is intending by the image of the horn blowing from far away? Can you relate it to the quotation from Bertolt Brecht that is placed at the beginning of the sonnet sequence? (A translation might be: “O change of times! Thou expectation of the people!”)
- (i) Analyse the sonnet form as used by Morgan in the sequence. How many lines in the sonnet? How many syllables in each line? How do the lines rhyme throughout? Does Morgan use the same form for all the sonnets you have read?

Now try to write a sonnet of your own, following the same pattern exactly, on a subject that might fit into the “**Sonnets from Scotland**”, dealing with either the past or the present or the future or the alien observers viewing Scotland.

- (j) Finally, complete your study of Morgan’s “**Sonnets from Scotland**” by reading quickly through all the sonnets in order to get a sense of the whole work as a unity. The 51 sonnets are separate poems in their own right, but together they make up a single long poem, one of Morgan’s most successful poetic achievements.

3. THE POET IN A VIOLENT WORLD

Chosen texts: “**Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries**” (A. E. Housman, *Last Poems*, 1922)
“**Another Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries**” (Hugh MacDiarmid, 1935)
“**A Third Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries**” (Edwin Morgan, *Sweeping Out the Dark*, 1994)

- (a) *Preparation*: Look up the work ‘mercenary’, and discuss its application, first to military forces, and then to other aspects of life, e.g. business, politics, entertainment, character and human relationships.

Find out about famous mercenaries, both individuals and military units, in history, such as the Greeks under their leader Xenophon fighting for Persia, the medieval and Renaissance free companies (as in *The White Company* by Arthur Conan Doyle, *Ash* by Mary Gentle, or the ‘Niccolo’ series of novels by Dorothy Dunnett), the Papal Swiss Guard, the Scots Guard of the French kings, the German Hessian troops used by the British in the American War of Independence, the Gurkha regiments in the British Army, and most recently ‘security’ firms that contract mercenaries for activities in Africa and elsewhere.

Discuss how right or wrong it is to hire soldiers for political or economic purposes, and how reliable such soldiers might ultimately be in a real crisis.

What is an ‘epitaph’? What is it suggesting about the army of mercenaries?

(b) Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries
(A. E. Housman)

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth’s foundations fled,
Follow’d their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood and earth’s foundations stay;
What God abandon’d, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.

What is the attitude of the poet, A. E. Housman, towards the mercenary army? Does this attitude arise out of idealism or realism about war?

What qualities does he find in these soldiers? How does he suggest that they were engaged in defending something good and right?

Compare the first stanza line by line with the second. What similarities do you notice about them?

A. E. Housman was a Professor of Latin and a scholar in Greek and Latin studies. What kind of mercenaries is he probably thinking of in his ‘classical’ epitaph?



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A S L S

(c) **Another Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries**
(Hugh MacDiarmid)

It is a God-damned lie to say that these
Saved, or knew, anything worth any man's pride.
They were professional murderers and they took
Their blood money and impious risks and died.
In spite of all their kind, some elements of worth
With difficulty persist here and there on earth.

What is the attitude of the Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, to mercenaries? Is this attitude idealistic or realistic, or does it seem to come out of another set of feelings?

What influence do mercenary soldiers have upon civilisation and society, in MacDiarmid's opinion? How much may he be exaggerating this influence?

MacDiarmid was consciously replying to A. E. Housman's "Epitaph". Compare the two poems closely. What words and phrases and ideas is MacDiarmid deliberately echoing and commenting on?

Compare the forms of the two poems above. What obvious differences can you see between them? What effect does MacDiarmid obtain by ending the poem with a couplet (two rhyming lines)?

(d) **A Third Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries**
(Edwin Morgan)

We write our own; no one does it for us.
Only those who have been there know the score.
The pay was good, but thousands more before us
Would testify note-counting's but a chore.
Adrenalin, adrenalin that courses
Along the blood as bullets do's the key.
Shouts, cracks, burning buildings were the sources
Of the hot joy that made us die – or dee.

Instead of referring to the mercenaries as 'these', Morgan uses 'we'. What does this suggest about the presentation of the mercenaries? How appropriate is the word 'epitaph' as a description of the poem?

What does the poem tell us about the psychology of mercenary soldiers? Why do they follow their trade of fighting and killing? What is their attitude towards the money they are paid?

Compare the form of Morgan's poem with the forms of both Housman's and MacDiarmid's poems. How does it both resemble and differ from the others?

Look at the last line of the poem, 'Of the hot joy that made us die – or dee'. Compare it with the last line of

Robert Burns's poem, "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" ("Scots Wha Ha'e"). What is Morgan perhaps suggesting? (Many Scots have fought as mercenaries in foreign armies over hundreds of years. Donald Campbell's play, *Somerville the Soldier*, would be worth finding and reading in this connection.)

(e) **Conclusion:** the three Epitaphs are clearly linked by the fact that both MacDiarmid and Morgan are influenced by and are reacting against Housman's original. Morgan is influenced by both his predecessors. One can often find that a poet is influenced by a poem by an earlier writer in creating a new view of a topic.

How do the three poems reflect differing attitudes throughout the twentieth century towards war and soldiers, and their effect on society? How relevant is it that Housman was a Classical scholar brought up in the Victorian age, whereas both MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve) and Morgan were medical orderlies in wartime, MacDiarmid during the First World War and Morgan during the Second? Does it seem relevant also that MacDiarmid held strong left-wing political opinions?

Now conclude the study of these three poems by either trying to write your own "Epitaph", drawing upon your thinking about the ideas in the poems, or by writing an essay about the appeal of violence to certain kinds of personality.