

Glasgow Sonnet No1

Edwin Morgan's *Glasgow Sonnet No1* is an unconventional sonnet, which explores themes of poverty and urban decay. The deliberate use of 'sonnet' in the title is intended to mislead the reader, as the connotations of 'sonnet' include love, romance, joy and happiness; this contrasts with the morose themes of poverty and destruction in the poem. The use of 'Glasgow' in the title not only denotes the setting, but the connotations may include: predominantly working class, harsh, inner-city living (obviously this is a negative stereotype).

The poem's form is a sonnet; specifically it is Petrarchan - it's structured into 14 lines of strict rhyme: ABBA ABBA CDC DCD. Iambic pentameter, traditionally used in sonnets, has been employed by Morgan and adds to the reader's appreciation of the versification. The sonnet is divided into two sections: an octave and a sestet.

The octave (first eight lines) focuses on the external environment, which is unpleasant and dangerous. It's filled with 'trash', 'old mattresses', and 'bric-a-brac' which 'spill out some ash', also, the building has 'no windows left to smash'. The 'black block' is 'condemned to stand' (a paradox) suggesting the building is unsuitable for habitation - it should perhaps be demolished, but instead must remain (a worse fate). This might further suggest that the building has been forgotten about to the extent that it's not worthy of the resources required to demolish it, and that its inhabitants have been abandoned and left to suffer along with the building.

The unusual use of volta in the ninth line indicates a change in the rhyme scheme from the octave to the sestet. The sestet (last six lines) explores life inside the building, and how this deprived environment affects the lives of the building's (few) inhabitants. The 'cracks deepen', which reveals the building is not sufficiently maintained, and 'rats crawl', showing the building is infested with vermin. Unemployment is evident: 'The man...lost his job'.

Morgan's meticulous application of rhythm and rhyme scheme throughout the poem is significant to the reader's overall understanding and enjoyment of the poem. Violent and harsh monosyllables are used: 'trash, ash, smash, crash', which are complimented by lifeless rhymes of antepenultimate syllables: 'mattresses, mistresses, fortresses, buttresses' – this creates an antagonistic effect, and reflects and reinforces how sorrowful life is at the building.

Imagery is integral to understanding the themes conveyed in *Glasgow Sonnet*

No 1:

"A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash.
Hackles on puddles rise, old mattresses
puff briefly and subside. Play-fortresses
of brick and bric-a-brac spill out some ash."

Morgan's word choice of 'mean', 'wind' and 'wanders' all open with labial consonants and close with 'n' – this creates a sense of the wind's movement; however, the lack of regularity suggests its movement is aimless, perhaps also reflecting a lack of motivation or direction in the building's inhabitants. 'Backcourt trash' reveals the external environment of the building is neglected. Personification is utilised: 'Hackles...puddles rise, mattresses puff...' suggesting fear and discomfort in the surroundings. Also, the inversion used in 'Hackles...rise' places emphasis on 'rise', showing the harshness of the weather.

Alliteration is used in line eight: “black block”. The connotations of the word ‘black’ are darkness and depression; the word choice continues the sombre theme. The plosive sound and the double alliteration created by ‘bl’ invokes a sense of power; that the tenement building is immovable and menacing. ‘Block’ denotes the building, *inter alia* – it might also be symbolic of the building and its inhabitants being outcast by society.

The image created by the metaphor ‘Roses of mould’ is powerful and effective. The décor of the building is unexpected, as the metaphor reveals the walls are covered with fungus, further revealing a theme of neglect and poverty. Furthermore, the ‘Roses of mould grow from ceiling to wall’, reveals the mould is spreading – this is supported by the assonance of the long ‘o’ in ‘roses’ and ‘mould’. The building is undeniably in a state of disrepair, and the reader feels empathy for its inhabitants – who are ‘the man’, and ‘mother and daughter.’

‘The man’ is nameless, and this creates an impersonal feeling, suggesting that the poem is relevant to us all. Similarly, ‘mother and daughter’ are also nameless. They are the ‘last mistresses’ of the building, indicating they are a dying show of strength. The use of ‘mistresses’ is ambiguous - in one sense it is a title of respect; however, the connotations may suggest an adulterous woman, and this undermines them. Perhaps what Morgan also suggests is that society tends to ignore poverty, and that by not having a name, that characters almost don’t exist.

By examining form, rhythm and rhyme, theme, imagery and word choice, it is clear that Morgan consistently and successfully depicts a very vivid and realistic image of poverty and social deprivation. The reader may at first think the sonnet form (associated with elevated themes) is an unusual choice for this topic, as the content contrasts starkly to our expectations. However, what Morgan ultimately suggests is that disadvantaged people are equally as worthy in literature as in society. I greatly appreciated how, through Morgan’s unique use of this form in *Glasgow Sonnet No 1*, and the ideas which the poem explores, that inequality and poverty exists in society - and being reminded of this is valuable.