

The First Men on Mercury

A Poem by Edwin Morgan

Teaching ideas from the Scottish Poetry Library

'I do not share what is sometimes called the current disillusion with science and technology. I count myself lucky to have lived at a time of discoveries of such far-reaching potential as space travel must be. The poet, I think, is entitled to set up his camp on other worlds than this, and to bring back what he can in the way of human relevance.

'One of my long-standing interests has been science-fiction. I enjoy writing science-fiction poems, and try to give them some "point", so that they are not merely fantastic. In "The First Men on Mercury", I imagine the first successful Earth expedition to the planet Mercury, and an attempt at conversation between the leader of the expedition and the first Mercurian who comes up to see what has happened. Again, to get the full effect of this poem, you ought to try reading it aloud, or of course it can be done with two voices. And the poem is not just about communication – I am sure you will find other themes and meanings. Earthman conquers the universe – or does he?'

Edwin Morgan in *Nothing Not Giving Messages*, ed. Hamish Whyte (Polygon, 1990)

RANGE

- P6–S2

READ THIS POEM IN ...

- Peter Porter (ed.), *New Poems 1971–1972: A P.E.N. Anthology*, Hutchinson, 1972.
- Morgan, Edwin, *From Glasgow To Saturn*, Carcanet, 1973.
- Bet Cherrington (ed.), *Facing The World: An Anthology Of Poetry For Humanists*, Pemberton, 1989.
- Morgan, Edwin, *Collected Poems*, Carcanet, 1990.
- Michael Rosen (ed), *The Kingfisher Book Of Children's Poetry*, Kingfisher Books, 1993.
- Martin Bates (ed.) *Chalk Face Muse: Poetry As A Foreign Language*, White Adder Press, 1999.
- Morgan, Edwin, *New Selected Poems*, Carcanet, 2000

LISTEN TO THIS POEM ...

- *Talk Poetry: Edwin Morgan, Selected Poems* (CD), Canto, 1985.
- *23 Poems of Edwin Morgan* (CD), ASLS, 2004
- online at
www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/edwinmorgan/poems/thefirstmenonmercury/audio.asp

Edwin Morgan's other science-fiction poems – some set on other planets or in outer space, others in a futuristic Scotland – include 'In Sobieski's Shield' and 'From the Domain of Arnheim' in *The Second Life* (1968); 'Thoughts of a Module' and 'Space Poem 3: Off Course' from *From Glasgow to Saturn* (1973); *Star Gate: science-fiction poems* (1979); or any of the last 16 poems (from 'The Norn (1)' onwards) in *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984). All these poems are in *Collected Poems* (1990), and (with the exception of some poems from *Star Gate*) in *New Selected Poems* (2000).



Listen to Edwin Morgan's reading of the poem.

How would you describe the Earthman's character?

How would you describe the Mercurian's character?

Choose two words for each from the list below, and say why you have chosen them.

bold
timid
sensitive
tolerant
insensitive
sympathetic
kind
jealous
bitter
greedy
generous
angry
intelligent
weak
gullible
arrogant
proud
sly
well-meaning
troublesome
suspicious
naïve
argumentative

What do you think the Earthman wants to get out of this encounter?

What do you think the Mercurian wants to get out of this encounter?

What is the outcome of their conversation?

Do you think the poem is optimistic or a pessimistic about the possibility of communication between different peoples?

Can you 'translate' any of the Mercurian words into English?

Writing: Earth

Write a list of your Top Ten Earth Facts – what any alien visitor to Earth needs to know!

You could think about

- cities and towns
 - the natural world – forests, rivers, mountains, seas, and so on
 - food
 - people
 - creatures
 - plants
 - activities
- and things not to do

Writing: Mercury

Make a word wall with your own Mercurian words. Find out some facts about Mercury, and think of the kinds of words a Mercurian might find important. They probably have lots of words for 'hot'!

A Landing

Write a poem about a visit to another planet, which hasn't been visited by humans before.

1. Visitors

Before you write the poem, make some notes about why you are visiting the planet.

- Are you interested in its resources – things like metals and minerals, oil and gas?
- Are you interested in seeing what if any life exists there?
- Are you looking for a new planet which humans could live on?
- Make a list of questions you want to ask the locals.

Make a list of say three important things you want to tell them about the earth.

2. Locals

Think about the planet's inhabitants.

- Have they met creatures from other planets before?
- Would they like to meet creatures from other planets? Why?
- What do they like about living on their planet?
- What do they not like about living on their planet?

Make a list of questions you want to ask the visitors.

Make a list of say three important things you want to tell them about your planet.

3. Dialogue

Write in pairs.

You can write the dialogue all in English, or you can devise another language for the locals. If you do, do it together so both of you understand it.

To start the dialogue, one pupil – playing the part of the human visitor – should write three or four questions to ask the planet's inhabitants.

The other pupil – playing the part of the planet's inhabitant – should write three or four questions to ask the human visitor.

You should exchange questions, and write answers in your respective roles of visitor and local.

You can then continue the dialogue – in English, or in a mix of the two languages.

Drama

A performance of 'The First Men on Mercury'

Split the pupils into groups of Earthmen and Mercurians, or allow them to choose themselves.

Be aware of the way the dynamics can change depending on the balance between the groups – whether one group outnumbers the other, or they are both roughly the same size.

Make sure the pupils are clear which group speaks which part.

After reading through the poem, but before beginning to work on the dialogue, pupils can explore the roles physically.

- How can the two groups best be differentiated physically? Is one more upright, still, controlled than the other?
- How do the two groups meet – by chance, does one group spot the other first and approach it, do the groups see each other at a distance and circle each other nervously?
- How does each group express its status? How does it try to impress the other group? What sort of impression does the group wish to make, for example welcoming, menacing, masterful, and so on?

Ask pupils to try different ways of speaking their parts:

- One voice, a pair of voices, speaking in unison, or a mix of all three.
- How can the two groups best be differentiated vocally?
- Does one speak louder, or faster, or lower, than the other?
- Where are the two groups in relation to each other when they are speaking?

Think about how close they are to each other, whether they are standing or sitting, whether they remain still during the dialogue, what kind of gestures, if any, they use while they are speaking, and so on.

- How do the two groups change in the course of the dialogue?
- How do they react to what the other group says?
- At what points do they become more or less confident?
- Have their relative positions changed during the course of the dialogue?
- What happens after the last line? Who moves away first?

Edwin Morgan Archive

SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY

By leaves we live 



Resource written by Ken Cockburn, April 2009

www.edwinmorgan.spl.org.uk/resources/dialogue.html

More teaching ideas and plans based on other Edwin Morgan poems can be found at the Edwin Morgan Archive website, where you can also browse a digital gallery of some of the publications.

www.edwinmorgan.spl.org.uk

The **Edwin Morgan Archive** was collected over a period of thirty years by Hamish Whyte, Edwin Morgan's friend, publisher and biographer.

The Archive represents the most significant and accessible collection of his work in print and other media, vividly illustrating the breadth and variety of his writing, his publishing career, and its context, decade by decade.

Handwritten corrections and notes made by Morgan in the published texts, give an illuminating insight into the mind of the poet.

For students of publishing and graphic design, the Edwin Morgan Archive also gives an insight into changing publishing trends in the UK, from hand-production in the 50s, to xeroxing in the 60s, to digitisation in the 80s, 90s and beyond.

There's something for everyone in the Archive. Anyone is welcome to explore!

Please contact us before you visit, so we can be sure staff are available to help:

Julie Johnstone, Curator
The Scottish Poetry Library
5 Crichton's Close
Canongate
Edinburgh EH8 8DT
Scotland, UK

General enquiries

Telephone: +44 (0)131 557 2876
Email: reception@spl.org.uk
Web: www.spl.org.uk

The Scottish Poetry Library runs an active education programme for Scottish schools. At www.spl.org.uk you'll find details of upcoming workshops and CPD sessions, competitions, ideas, tips and lesson plans.