

Elements of political and social protest writing: Text overview – Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems*

This resource explains some of the ways Tony Harrison's *Selected Poems* can be considered in relation to the genre of political and social protest writing. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning by giving an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of this genre. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

This selection of Harrison's poetry draws attention to the political and social protest writing elements of power, heritage, education, disenfranchisement, rebellion and violence. The poems are culturally and time specific, and have as their subject working class life in the north of England (though in *National Trust* Harrison does speak out for the disenfranchised in Cornwall). The main focus is on male workers – or men who are unemployed – in the latter half of the twentieth century, though their stories are sharpened by references to the plights of workers or the abused in earlier historical periods (for example, Patience Kershaw, the child who was employed as a hurrier in a nineteenth century coal mine and who suffered appalling conditions). Harrison speaks with a variety of voices, many of them conflicting, but underpinning them all is an anger against those who are privileged and a sympathy (though not unqualified) for those who are powerless. Many of Harrison's poems explore ideas of power, reflecting on those in society who 'have' and those who 'have not'. He sees society as essentially divided and in his poetry he explores divisions caused by social class, status, employment and education.

It is easy to read Harrison's poetry as autobiographical since he writes explicitly about personal experiences and about his family, but readers must always guard against simply asserting the narrators are Harrison. Although all the narrators are passionate in their dissent, the voices are complex and there is a self-consciousness about the way that Harrison constructs himself in his poetry. Underpinning the poems is the writer's discomfort with his own position as political writer, the irony that as a scholar and bard, he has removed himself from his working class roots and therefore, in a sense, loses the right to speak for that social class. In 'Working' he confronts this issue directly by suggesting

that his sonnet, written to draw attention to the plight of Patience Kershaw, is “a load of crap” and ought to be dumped “on a slagheap”; her story is “lost in this sonnet for the bourgeoisie”. There is irony too in who exactly Harrison is addressing. In writing the kind of rebellious poetry that he does, he wants to liberate poetry, remove it from its natural academic environment, yet the irony is that it is mostly enjoyed by the academic classes and studied in schools and universities. The irony is most explicitly foregrounded in v. where the confrontation with the imaginary “skin” in the cemetery becomes an interior duologue about the value of the narrator’s work. The poet-narrator argues that he only writes to give a voice to the skinhead. However although he tries to elevate the skin by finding meaning in his graffiti, the skinhead contemptuously tells him not to bother, not to waste his breath. In writing from a position of privilege, Harrison is well aware that he himself is on the other side of the divisions he explores. He is not part of the disenfranchised but rather he is separated from them, even from his own parents, by his education and the writing he does.

Unlike Blake whose political and social protest writing is totally serious, Harrison uses humour and theatricality to make serious political points. In some ways his writing is more akin to the satire of Swift. Humour, with its dark cutting edge, is evident in *Them & [uz]* where the teacher’s words of criticism and mockery are humorously dramatised. As the grammar school boy with his broad Yorkshire accent attempts to read Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale* (“mi ’art aches”), the teacher, speaking RP, interrupts: “Mine’s broken,/You barbarian, T.W.”

Power and the abuse of power

In his poems Harrison shows the polarisation between those who wield power and those who are victims. At the start of *National Trust*, Harrison incorporates a story that happened in a bottomless pit in Castleton in Derbyshire. To discover the depth of the pit, the upholders of “law and order” having a wager, thought it appropriate to winch a convict down. The terrifying experience sent the convict mad. While the law enforcers seem to think that the exercise was fair game, Harrison is clearly appalled, evidenced by the poem’s tone and how he then turns his anger onto scholars who he thinks could better be used to plumb the depths since they have killed the language of minority groups. In v. Harrison directly attacks the ruling classes and the Thatcher government who he blames for the closure of pits in the 1980s which led to widespread unemployment. While the powerful industrialists can have their names emblazoned on advertising signs at Leeds United football ground, the disenfranchised skinhead, angry at not being able to get a job, can only assert his identity by spraying graffiti on tombstones. It is the same story in Newcastle where the tight clothed skinhead is “on the dole”.

Disenfranchisement

One of the key elements in Harrison’s poetry of political and social protest is that of the way the powerful deprive the ordinary person of privilege. The skinhead in

v. knows that school did not give him a chance (his work was never marked with red ticks) and unlike those whose tombs grace the graveyard, he believes that he will go through life “doing t’ same nowt ah do now as a kid”. The vandals, who desecrate the graveyards in v., annoying as they are to the narrator and society, are essentially powerless. The acts of rebellion that Harrison records: the graffiti, the excessive drinking, the fighting, are all ways of asserting identity and all emphasise to the reader the political powerlessness of the disenfranchised man. Given the background of the miners’ strike and the past generations’ self-definition by their jobs (“Wordsworth built church organs”), the failure of the characters in v. to be “united” to jobs points up the futility of many of their actions. Harrison also shares his subjects’ sense of betrayal at the changes in the communities in which they live. In v. the father of the narrator feels lost, no longer able to see the familiar shops, feeling embarrassed at the supermarket where the check-out girls are too harassed to “smile or swap a joke with sad old geezers”.

Identity

Harrison’s anger at the way the powerful disenfranchise the working classes is linked to his concerns about the way individuals struggle for identity in an unfair world. On a personal level, Harrison struggles to define himself as a poet in relation to his upbringing. In v. as the poet muses on the gravestones in the Leeds Cemetery on Beeston Hill, he is not at ease with his role in the way that Gray is in *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* which Harrison’s poem parodies to some extent. The jokes about Wordsworth and Byron make a serious point about how Harrison feels alienated from his parents’ home and their resting place by his Latin and Greek learning. This alienation is of course intensified by his partial incomprehension of the vandals who spray the headstones. Although he can see that the paint spraying is a way for the vandals to raise their self-esteem, he fails to see how the offensive words on the graves of the dead achieve anything.

His alienation is intensified when the skinhead rounds on him personally, telling him to speak the language that his “mam spoke”, telling him too that Harrison’s mother thought his poetry obscene. Therein, of course, lies the rub. Harrison’s broken sense of identity is also explored in *Them and [uz]*. Although the poet asserts that his name is “Tony Harrison” and not the offensive and reductive initials given to him by his teacher, at the end of the poem, he has to acknowledge that the struggle will continue as his first mention in the *Times*, “automatically made Tony Anthony”.

Harrison’s young male characters, in contrast, while having no individual identities, do have a collective identity – though it could be argued that this simply consolidates their powerlessness. Whether through their tribal allegiance to their football team, to their sub-cultural group (“skins”), or to their political views (“NF”), there is little ambiguity about where they belong. But their belonging to these particular groups means that they will always be outsiders in terms of the ruling classes.

Language and Power

In his epigraph to *v.* Harrison quotes Arthur Scargill. Harrison's background and education taught him that 'language is power' and the deprivation of language results in powerlessness. In *National Trust* he rails against the way that ordinary Cornish people have had their language taken away from them by the educated. Just as their land was acquisitioned by the National Trust, so too has their language been 'taken', presumably by scholars who use Standard English, the language of prestige. Harrison uses the Cornish dialect to make his point at the end of the poem ("the tongueless man gets his land took") though ironically he translates it into Standard English, thereby perhaps undermining his own argument. In *Marked with D* his point is made in a more personal way. In this poem he reflects upon his father, who worked all of his life as a baker but who, in the end, "hungered for release from mortal speech" as it had "kept him down". Harrison's depiction of his father as a man who was "made to feel like some dull oaf" is poignant, perhaps even more so because only now through the education of his son-poet can his story be told.

Gender and Power

Harrison's poems are almost exclusively masculine. Feminine presences—the "dead wife", the "MOTHER" tattoo, "my woman" at "home"—are few and when they do appear, they are static, lifeless or perceived as intruding into, or disrupting, the masculine world in which Harrison and his characters are attempting to find their place. So, while Harrison on one level is protesting against disenfranchisement in terms of men, on another level he is endorsing the powerlessness of women. His portrayal of women (or his ignoring of their stories and situations) is in itself disempowering but whether or not Harrison is being ironic is a question students might wish to debate. In *Working* which does focus in part on the plight of a woman, it is important to note that the woman has long been dead (Patience Kershaw, who worked in a coal mine in Manchester in the 1840s) and it could be argued that Harrison is more concerned with discussing his own ambivalence about himself as a writer rather than this woman's suffering. Certainly he makes no attempt to relate the story of patience to women in employment today. Gender politics is an interesting issue to explore in Harrison's poetry. In *v.* his representation of his wife could be seen as disquieting, especially if considered from a feminist perspective. In a way he shares more similarities with male writers of the nineteenth century, in that he demeans her while apparently revering her. Unable to resolve his issues with his alter ego he decides to leave the graveyard and go home to his "woman". At this point it is suggested that she is a kind of angel in the house (the fire will be lit and she can comfort him as together they listen to opera and later his "bride" will come into the bedroom to be naked by his side). The representation is not exactly flattering. Neither is the suggestion that in bed "opposites seem sometimes unified" - presumably sometimes they do not even 'seem' so - and Harrison's decision to rhyme his wife's metaphorical description as his "anchor" with "wanker" leaves a jarring note.

However, the difficulties that are raised in the way Harrison represents women, does not militate against the political insights he offers in relation to men. Harrison is concerned with the various levels of power which act upon men and the way men define themselves; he shows how men construct themselves according to cultural expectations – and in some ways this perhaps applies to him too. In *Divisions* Harrison writes explicitly about “manhood” in relation to how the “decorated skins lay bare a soul”. The young male football supporters, tattooed with MOTHER wear the uniform that is expected of them – the bovvvers and scarf tied around their wrists; they also behave in ways compatible with their unemployed status. The brewery supports “the unambiguously ‘male’/Northern working class spectator sports” and suggests that it is butch to drink Brown Ale and to become “legless”. In this way, perhaps Harrison is suggesting, there can be no hope of progress and those to blame are those with power.

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