

Compare and
contrast 'the sick
equation' by brian
patten and 'long
distance' by t...



In this essay I am going to compare and contrast 'The Sick Equation' by Brian Patten and 'Long Distance' by Tony Harrison. 'The Sick Equation' is about how two parents' intense arguing and general disrespect for each other had such a damaging effect on their son's thoughts, personality and life as an adult. Stanza one gives us some background information to the poem. The poet mentions the word 'school' in the opening line so we can assume he is between the ages of ten and sixteen.

We also learn that at this time, his parents are still living together but the house is '... full of anger and pain.' Which gives us an indication of how he feels about his home life. The poet assumes from his past experience that he can't go with anyone because his equation is broken.

He feels it is better being one, rather than being two and trying to make things work because someone will always end up being hurt. Up to stanza five, Patten describes how he pushed away anyone who wanted to love him and how he always thought that marriage would end in divorce. He has very low self-esteem. He would rather not be loved at all than be loved by someone, only then to be rejected by them. However, in stanza six, we find out that he has completely turned his life around and has found someone to love. In contrast, Harrison writes about how loving his parents were and how his father still loved his deceased mother and did things he would have done if she were still alive.

Stanza one gives you details of what the father did/does for his wife. This shows what a loving relationship they had as he was doing things to make her life more comfortable because he loved and cared about her. Stanzas

two and three say how ashamed he feels about what he is doing and how the only way for his grief to end is for her to return to him. It's almost as if he feels his love for her is a crime that needs to be concealed from anyone who might disapprove. He can't risk anyone knowing about his actions and telling him that she is dead because it would make it so much harder for him to cope.

The themes of both poems are based around loss. In 'Long Distance', Harrison's father has to cope with the loss of his wife and then Harrison has to deal with the demise of both his parents. In 'The Sick Equation', there is a loss of love and affection between Patten's parents so, in reality, they don't really have much of a relationship. This is a similarity between the two poems.

Another resemblance involving the two pieces of work is the fact that the word 'raw' is mentioned in both pieces. It is ironic that both poets used the term in their work but manages to blend it in with their specific topic. Patten uses the word in the line 'raw cocoon of parental hate' while Harrison uses it in 'still raw love' When you think of 'raw' you imagine a red, fleshy wound, which brings lots of pain. This could be how Harrison's father felt at losing his wife and how Patten felt growing up.

Although the poems are about starkly contrasting themes, both poets manage to merge it in with their work. It is a very powerful word and in both poems is used successfully to give the respective line a more potent impact on the reader. The third and final similarity between the poems is the fact that they are both about families and learning from your parents. However,

as I will explain later, it is clear that both poets learnt very different things from their parents. The themes of the two poems are very different.

In ' Long Distance', the main subject is of death within the family and coping with bereavement. Harrison described his parents' relationship and how much his father missed his wife when she passed away.

... still raw love' is a useful insight into the sort of relationship Harrison's shared together which you can tell from this line alone was still going strong. It illustrates how attached the poets parents were in life and death.

You feel overwhelming sympathy for Harrison's father who seems to be in a state of denial because he can't seem to accept his wife's death as he is still doing all the mundane things like warming her slippers by the gas and renewing her transport pass, which he did for the many years that they were married. In ' The Sick Equation', the topic is of a much more grim and psychological nature. Patten's parents had an unstable relationship and were continuously arguing which was bound to have a severe effect on Patten. His childhood was not a happy one as he felt he was '...

.. in a raw cocoon of parental hate. '. This is such a powerful line, as you perceive a cocoon as an enclosed space you cannot escape from. He felt trapped in his parents hate and he could not break free.

' I grew-or-did not grow' is a line in ' The Sick Equation' which describes as he felt. The consequences of the horror he witnessed at home left him physically, a grown man, but mentally, a scared little boy. Another theme is fear, as Patten, as an adult, was unnerved at the thought of being in a

relationship because he thought it would mirror that of his parents.

Therefore, he isolated himself from everyone, including family and friends, which meant he was very lonely - another issue raised in the poem. Possibly the main topic though, is anger. Throughout the poem, Patten discloses his anger by using strong diction such as 'raw', 'hate' and 'pain'.

He is bitter and incensed that his parents' feuding has resulted in him becoming a lonely man with no one to love. Both poems are exceedingly diverse in relation to style as well. In 'Long Distance', the poem looks very neat and tidy on the page, which, it could be argued, is a reflection of what Harrison's childhood was like - orderly and precise. The poem follows the rhyme scheme of 'ABAB', however, it changes for the last stanza to 'ABBA' because we are now seeing things from Harrison's perspective. The poem is a mixture of past and present.

Harrison talks about what his father did and what he still does. It is a very simple poem both in layout and rhyme scheme. The style of 'The Sick Equation' is much more intricate. The poem is very much based on memories of his childhood and you can see that most of them were bad and this is replicated in the outline of the poem. On paper it looks very disorderly, erratic and seems to be lacking in structure - just like Patten's early years.

His life as a child had no structure and this is emulated in his layout of the poem. The poem does not conform to a rhyme scheme because it would not fit in with this type of topic. Rhymes belong with more soft-natured, upbeat poems, which is definitely not 'The Sick Equation'. However, in the closing stanza, Patten uses a rhyming couplet to round off the poem. It is said in

defiance towards his parents because he is saying that even though his parents put him through so much grief and trauma, he came through it all and has found his fears to be totally unjustified.

Patten has successfully maintained a loving and caring relationship with someone. ' And however late on, I am better off for knowing now That given love, by taking love all can in time refute...

. ' Patten now believes that love can heal mental wounds, like it has done for him, and even though a long time has passed, and he's missed out on so much, he is better off for it. The language of these two poems is very diverse. In ' Long Distance', Harrison uses colloquial diction such as '..

. popped out to get the tea' and ' You couldn't just drop in' which shows that relaxed intimate manner of the poem. Harrison was brought up in Leeds and his native tongue can be heard in line two and four where ' gas' and ' pass' are supposed to rhyme. ' I believe that life ends with death and that is all. .

This is a line from ' Long Distance which shows that Harrison is a blunt, non-religious man. He does not believe in life after death so therefore does not consider the fact that his mother may still be around, if only in spirit.'He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief' shows that he condemns his father for his actions and for trying to keep his mothers spirit alive. But in the last stanza, we find that Harrison is no different to his father. ' You haven't both gone shopping; just the same, in my new black leather phone book there's your name and the disconnected number I still call.

There are two words that show that Harrison is a complete copy of his father. 'New' and 'disconnected'. The reader now discovers that Harrison's father has passed away as well. However, instead of accepting it like he told his father to, he finds that he too cannot let go that easily. He still puts his parents' number in his new phone book and still rings the number even though it has been disconnected.

Disconnected also describes the relationship Harrison now has with his parents. They are not a phone call or a car journey away; they are now permanently disconnected from his life. They are in a place where he cannot reach them. In 'The Sick Equation' Patten uses some strong diction to convey how unhappy his upbringing was.

'Raw'. 'Hate'. 'Anger', 'Pain', and 'Anguish' are just some of the vocabulary he uses to put this message across. In 'The Sick Equation', Patten uses the image of an albatross to describe divorce. The albatross comes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' where the mariner kills the albatross and, as a consequence, is made to carry it around his neck. It was a punishment and that is how Patten sees divorce, the punishment for getting married.

'I never let love stay long enough to take root,' is a metaphor Patten uses to express how he pushed away anyone who wanted to love him. He compares this with the roots of a tree because, like love, given the chance they can run very deep and are continuously growing. They stay rooted deep within the soil, like love in the soul. Patten makes many references to flight and flying in the poem because when you think of flying, you imagine a lone person,

high in the clouds. He envisions flying people to be single and the flightless to be married.

He suggests that married people wish to fly but their union weighs down the soul, therefore restricting them from doing so. 'Home, sweet home' is a very well know phrase but Patten uses it in a very sardonic tone of voice because in reality, his childhood home was anything but sweet. In conclusion, I would say that I preferred 'Long Distance' by Tony Harrison because it paints a picturesque view of what everyone's childhood should be like - warm, loving and stable. I also like it because I think it has been very cleverly written. Just when you think you know what Harrison is trying to tell you, just when you think you can sympathise with him about his love for his father and his torment at watching his father's extreme grief, the poem jolts you.

The last stanza tells you that the poem was never just about the father. It's about Harrison and his won struggle to accept the finality of his parent's death and his own refusal to see them as 'disconnected' from his life.