

Harrison's "national trust" and the corruption of the upper classes



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Published in *The School of Eloquence* in 1978, Tony Harrison's "National Trust" is the embodiment of his frustrations at the British social-class system. Through this poem, he divulges how, after receiving a post-War opportunity for education, he was dislocated from his family. "National Trust" exposes his opinions regarding this vexed transformation, including his subjective comments on the celebration of the past. Harrison wrote "The School of Eloquence" as a weapon, illustrating the oppression of the undereducated and critiquing the upper classes. He demonstrates the quintessence of a conflicted society in the late 20th century and focuses on the class struggles of the past; after all, "National Trust" was composed as a corrupted, 16-lined, Meredithian sonnet, mirroring the corruption in the upper class.

Harrison shows his resentment at the upper class by critiquing it unambiguously in "The School of Eloquence." This approach is demonstrated by how he depicts the founders of the National Trust; the ironically described "stout upholders of law and order" "borrowed a convict," objectifying an entire social class and subverting ideas about personal dignity through commodification. Harrison is demonstrating the infinite greed of the upper class, further revealed through the enjambment in the first stanza, which also shows the opening words "bottomless pits" to be indicative of aristocratic indulgence. "National Trust" accentuates the corruption of the upper class through this class's ignorance of suffering in the working classes. Symbolic of this, the line "and stout upholders of our law and order" has eleven syllables, breaking the iambic pentameter of the poem and hinting at discord beneath the aristocratic façade. Similarly,

Harrison critiques the elite through the oxymoron “ good flogging”, which is indicative of ruling-class ignorance, particularly its glorification of suffering.

Harrison embodies his frustrations by trivialising the aristocratic vernacular, with ironic language such as “ hush-hush” and “ one day” mocking the elite idiolect and also hinting at the elite’s inadequacy to rule. In particular, ideas of corruption are shown by the sibilance of “ hush-hush”, suggesting the deliberate silencing of the highest social class and emphasising how the “ silence of scholars is a very different thing from the tonguelessness of the miners” (Spencer, 1994). Harrison here asserts “ his role as spokesman for the inarticulate” (Young, 2000, 136) by attributing negative ideals to the upper class. This tactic demonstrates his anger, born from upper class corruption and “ the class system which had made his parents and people like them feel inadequate” (Burton, 2001, 18). However, Harrison uses linguistic othering to distinguish himself from the working class and “ the language that they swore it in”, clearly differentiating between himself and the working class at large with the pronoun “ they”. This word choice represents his need to assert himself as an individual, originating from his dislocation from the social class system. It also implies his resentment at the working class for their passivity in allowing their own oppression. Harrison, apparently, regards the working class as inferior in resolve, with a “ tongue that weighed like lead” (Harrison, 1978).

Nonetheless, Harrison defends the working class in “ National Trust”. He centers the sonnet on the symbolism of the “ convict” that was “ winched... down” the mine at “ Castleton” to settle a wager on “ its depth”, exposing how the aristocrats stripped the working class of a voice in society, and <https://assignbuster.com/harrisons-national-trust-and-the-corruption-of-the-upper-classes/>

manipulated them to be “ flayed, grey, mad, dumb”. This monosyllabic “ dumb” is figurative of the oppression of the working class, emphasised by the position on a separate line at the end of the stanza. The homonym is repeated, which represents its dual meaning and indicates Harrison’s need to defend the working class, juxtaposed to his anguish at their allowing of their own suppression. Furthermore, its harsh, plosive qualities suggest that the author is accusing the upper class, thus reflecting on the contrast between “ dumb” and the onomatopoeic sibilance of “ hush-hush”. Such a feature highlights how the suffering of the working class was surreptitious, significant in “ National Trust”, as Harrison further questions modern history. By opening the sonnet with “ Bottomless pits”, he links to how he opens his poem, “ Book Ends 1”, with the plosive “ Baked”. Since “ Book Ends” focuses on Harrison’s relationship with his parents, and his exclusion from the social-classes, this link shows how his emotions infiltrate his writing, explaining his resentment towards the class system displayed throughout The School of Eloquence.

Harrison further emphasises the oppression of the working class in “ Castletown”. Here, the polysyllabic “ castle” is indicative of aristocratic power and the juxtaposed, monosyllabic “ ton” is phonetically silenced with a shortened vowel sound, also revealing the northern vernacular. This subtle usage symbolises how the working class was oppressed by the upper class; Harrison fights to emphasise this theme throughout the The School of Eloquence. He draws on the plosive “ B” and “ P” sounds of “ Bottomless Pits”; by juxtaposing these with the contrasting sibilance of “ Bottomless”, Harrison enforces his views of how the working class voice was silenced by

society. He also uses contrasting language, such as the harsh, plosive “booming” and the onomatopoeic “silenced”; this further juxtaposition shows further comparison between the two classes and demonstrates the oppression of working classes through ruling-class power. Similarly, in “Book Ends 1”, he juxtaposes “shattered” and “silences”, proving that Harrison sought to use “School of Eloquence” as a weapon and illustrating how languages such as Cornish were suppressed from history. Furthermore, the idea that “the dumb go down in history and disappear” represents the working-class position in the social hierarchy, and the corresponding loss of language and culture. The “convict” that the aristocrats sent “down” the mine could be a metaphor for this oppression, also linking to Harrison’s ideas in “Working”; how the working class is “lost in this sonnet” reflects his need to preserve them through The School of Eloquence.

Harrison also demonstrates the suffering of the working class in other, yet firmly related, manners. The title “National Trust” is polysemic, and represents both the name of the company that seeks to preserve history, and how the Nation has an obligation to remember the hardships of the working class. The use of this title highlights suffering and causes readers to question the celebration of the past, particularly how “Cornish tin-miners were robbed of their labour, their native language and the chance to organise themselves into a prototype trade union” (Spencer, 1994). Suffering is also suggested by the disrupted rhythm at the end of the first stanza. The caesura preceding the series of monosyllabic lexis interrupts the iambic rhythm, reflecting the corruption of the upper class and emphasizing working-class destitution. The caesura further represents a change of class

views, comparing the complex language of the upper class to the restricted idiolect of the working class and, thus, emphasising the working class's lack of power. This pitiful image for the working class presents futile imagery for Harrison's poetry, and connotes to "the whole fatuity of the belief that writing poetry will DO anything" (Harrison, 1982).

The School of Eloquence emphasises Harrison's experiences in the social class system, exploring the suffering of the working class and the contemptible success and power of the upper classes. It could be said that Harrison's "picture of the scholarship boy as a heroic fighter against the odds is sentimental and anachronistic" (Morrison, 1982); however, he allows his language to portray his own memories and experiences, summarising his horror at the oppression of the working class through the theme of inarticulacy. He therefore explores the link that combines social class, power, and articulacy, and how this affected him throughout his life.

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