

"the barrier" and "long distance" essay



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Ever since man has been able to script and speak they have been able to express their emotions. Love poetry has been passed down and become part of our cultural and literary heritage. In the following essay I will be using 2 different poems: "The Barrier by Claude McKay" and "Long Distance by Tony Harrison"; both express love in different ways. In "Long Distance", Tony Harrison portrays an eternal love between his parents, a never ending love despite the death of his mother. He describes his father as a man who was so deeply in love with his wife that even two years after her death he's still living a lie.

His father is struggling to cope with loss of love and is comforting himself with his actions. Tony Harrison criticizes his father and considers he is showing a lack of understanding "as he still went to renew her transport pass". In "The Barrier", Claude McKay again expresses a forbidden love but this time both the lovers are still alive but living in a racially divided society. Claude McKay describes her as an angel, "your eyes are downing day" but he continuously cautions himself that "I must not gaze" even though his feelings for her are clear.

He leaves us wondering what's wrong, what's the barrier right until the end where he hits us with the barrier "for there's the barrier of race, you're fair and I am dark". In this poem there's a social barrier which forbids their love, whereas the contrasting poem "Long Distance" has a love which can not be, as one of the lovers has passed away and the son believes that two years is more than enough time to move on in life and adjust to living without his love. "Long Distance" is written in a traditional form of 4 stanzas, each stanza portraying and developing his ideas from the previous stanza.

Tony Harrison conveys his parents day to day life by describing tasks his father used to do and still does do even though his mother has died, “ dad kept her slippers warming by the fire” and also “ put hot water bottles on her side of the bed” this shows his father really loved and cared for his mother and did a lot for her. Such words as “ alone and dead” really do emphasize that he is alone and mentally letting go in the sense that he can not get over his wife’s death.

The tone and language give the poem a northern feel, such rhyming words as “ pass and gas”, and every day environment lets the reader relate to the situation. Tony Harrison’s father is in a very unstable situation, even if still being in grieving after 2 years of her death wasn’t bad enough , he’s aware of what he is doing and trying to act alone, “ he’d put you off an hour to give him time to clear away her things and look alone”. This may be a sign that he is just putting on a act for sympathy and so people won’t leave him on his own.

In the 3rd stanza, Tony Harrison italicise “ knew, he “ knew” she just popped out to get the tea” this to me seems like he is trying to be ironic, using sarcasm as he is trying to inflict that his father is just feeling lonely again and that he really should get over it. Tony Harrison is unable to agree with his father’s handling of this situation and shows a lack of understanding towards his father, he believes his father is critically unstable and condemns his actions.

Tony Harrison firmly states his own beliefs and doesn’t understand his parent’s love “ I believe life ends with death”. In the last stanza of the poem

Tony Harrison changes the rhyme scheme and diverts the focus of the poem onto him, from ABAB he changes to ABBA to cause a larger impact on his new found beliefs. Now that both his parents have passed away he finds himself in the same position, he finds himself using a disconnected number just to help as his father just to help him through difficult times and for the first time you see him contradict himself.

This statement that “ life ends with death” he now finds harder to believe with the death of his father and struggles to understand concept. Or perhaps he is just feeling guiltily about how he regarded, respected and treated his father as he was grieving for his wife. He names the poem, “ Long Distance” which I interpret as the distance between heaven and earth, the distance, the distance between mother and father, father and son. “ The barrier” is a poem which conveys a man’s forbidden love for a woman.

It has a ABAB rhyme scheme and only has 3 stanzas, It is a short poem with strong emotions. The poet uses words such as “ fascinating and sun illumined” to show his feelings for his lover, These are strong words, which get across well to the reader how much he loves her, however the man is black and has fallen in love with a white girl in a racist society. It is hard to relate to how he is feeling as racism has been largely ruled out in most areas and racism is very uncommon, even though I live in a multi cultural society.

The man is forbidden to love this girl for both may end up getting killed in the racist society of U. S. A in the 1920’s. The man acts calmly and reminds himself he must not. The word “ gaze” suggests that he is fascinated by her, he is also scared, she knows what could happen if he came closer, “ comes

from your trembling throat" this shows that the man gazing at her has began to scare her. The poet sends across a very strong message with the last stanza and particularly in the last line.

He explains " you're fair and I am dark". Even though their love is possible, unlike the relationship in " Long Distance, racism means it is forbidden and condemns them from ever being with each other. The poem is called " The Barrier" and the poem sums up the barrier as the racism between whites and blacks, it represents the social barrier between the two groups of people even though there both the same inside, just two different colours.

As racism is frowned upon in today's society, the title holds a really strong message. " The Barrier" is a poem where the poet keeps telling himself that the relationship can not happen, " I must not" but it can, they just have to get over the social barrier where as in " Long Distance" a man is so drawn back by his wife's death even after 2 years he still lives a lie, a life where he pretends she is still alive but the honest truth is he's just alone and love has left him on his own.