

# A lengthened epitaph reverberating the elegiac tone<sup>1</sup> in Tony Harrison's poems about his parents

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**Abstract:** Tony Harrison is Britain's principal film and theatre poet and has famously said "Poetry is all I write, whether for books, or readings, or for the National Theatre, or for the opera house and concert hall, or even for TV."<sup>2</sup> He was born in Leeds in 1937, won a scholarship to Leeds grammar and read Classics at Leeds University. Harrison's majority of poems, explore the gulf between his own class background and his education and the powerlessness of the inarticulate. Tony Harrison belongs to those individuals who reject any existing language and literary standards and create their unique approaches to the portrayal of reality and people. His literary prowess resulted in a breakdown in the relationship he shared with his father due to his father's lack of understanding of his literary creations. It was during this period that the mother held their relationship together, but when she passed away the bond ended and Harrison and his father became estranged. This alienation not only forms the background of his personal life but also the primary source for his literary achievements. An elegy not only refers to poems that mourn the death of someone, but poems echoing estrangement and alienation also fall under the genre of elegy. The elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead and those grieving, and finally consolation and solace. These three stages can be seen to some extent in Tony Harrison's poems, especially in the chosen ones, *Bookends*, *Long Distance* and *Background Material*, thus rendering them to be elegiac in tone.

**Keywords:** Tony Harrison, Elegy, Public Poetry, Alienation, Estrangement, Grief, Elegiac Stages

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## 1. Introduction

Tony Harrison is considered a master of theatrical poetry and has been credited with keeping verse drama alive in the contemporary theatre. He writes traditionally structured poetry in which he combines vernacular with classical language to explore the conflict between his working-class upbringing and his formal education and literary career. A central theme in Harrison's poetry is his alienation from his family, community, and social class, a consequence of his education and his abandonment of the less eloquent language of his ancestors. Yet Harrison is also concerned with the social, economic, and political implications of the suppression of working-class language by the educated

classes.<sup>3</sup>

Tony Harrison belongs to those individuals who reject any existing language and literary standards and create their unique approaches to the portrayal of reality and people. Harrison's style of writing reflects an ambiguity of expression due to the differences in his social environment and the received education. In particular, Harrison demonstrates the tensions between colloquial language that reflects his background and Standard English that he learned at school. Harrison's poems portray his Proletarian background and his constant attempts to transform the traditional poetic forms. The poet utilises the usual sonnet form, implementing certain dialects and colloquial speech that go beyond the norms of Standard English. Harrison's

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<sup>1</sup>The consideration of Tony Harrison's poems about his parents as an elegy has been dealt with concretely in the mentioned thesis: Smalley, Rebecca Emily (1991) *The role of memory in the poetry of Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison with specific reference to elegy*, Durham theses, Durham University.; 22-11-2013

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, Tony. *Author Statement*. Contemporary Writers. British Council Arts. 5 Dec. 2005

<<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth188>>; 05-05-2014

<sup>3</sup><http://www.enotes.com/topics/tony-harrison/critical-essays/harrison-tony>; 05-05-2014

poetic language is so powerful and unique that he manages to produce verse films on his poems and adapt Greek tragedies for modern theatres.<sup>4</sup> As Richard Eyre puts it, "Poet and playwright are usually seen as mutually opposed roles - the poet a solitary figure answerable to no one but his own talent and conscience, the playwright a collaborator, colluding in the pragmatism and expediency of production" (1997: 43). However, Tony Harrison manages to successfully combine both roles and create unforgettable literary pieces of work. According to Rowland, "there are clearly thematic and stylistic overlaps between the two genres [plays and poems] in Harrison's work" (2001: 27).

## 2. Background

The story of how the baker's son from Leeds went to grammar school and became a classicist, and what that meant for him, for the people he left behind and his take on the world at large, has been the starting point for much of his creative work. Tony Harrison was born in 1937, the first child of Harry and Florrie Harrison. Even at primary school he remembers himself "ravenous" for knowledge, and he won a place at Leeds Grammar School and then went on to Leeds University. There is an explanation of where his interest and talent came from in the poem *Heredity*: "How you became a poet's a mystery/ Wherever did you get your talent from? / I say: I had two uncles; Joe and Harry-/ One was a stammerer, the other dumb." (1984: 111) The poet lives among "the inarticulate" but turns to be very eloquent through his education. He has sensed the gap between his eloquence and his parents' inarticulation. Accordingly he has a strong desire for articulation. He has demonstrated so when interviewed with John Tusa: "I was aware of a hunger for articulation. And I think in retrospect, it came from not only the fact that I had an uncle who was deaf and dumb and one who stammered but a father who was reticent, shy, unable to express himself. And that the idea of articulation, expression, became for me absolutely vital to existence. Out of that atmosphere of inarticulation came my ravenousness for articulation, for language... I wanted to learn Latin and Greek and become a poet and acquire power over language. I only understand this clearly in retrospect, that my ability to study came from a hunger to learn all the resources of articulation."<sup>5</sup>

Tony Harrison remembers his parents being nervous about his academic success. "They felt if you're launched on a path of education, it would take you completely away from them, and it does. I was one of the few people from south Leeds at the school and they were very shy about things like meeting people. Maybe there was some resentment too. They were told I'd be a professor when I

was 20-odd and stuff like that."<sup>6</sup>

The background of Harrison is his emergence from a lower class family, in which his mother was a house-wife and his father a miner and then a baker who failed his eleventh grade exams. Harrison, on the other hand passed and won a scholarship into Leeds grammar school and went on to study classics at Leeds University. His literary prowess resulted in a breakdown in the relationship he shared with his father due to his father's lack of understanding of his son's interest in literature. It was during this period that the mother held their relationship together, but when she passed away this ended and Harrison and his father became estranged. This alienation not only forms the background of his personal life but also the primary source for his literary achievements.

## 3. The Elegiac Tone

The term "elegy" was originally used for a type of poetic metre (Elegiac metre), but is also used for a poem of mourning, from the Greek 'Elegos' - a reflection on the death of someone or on a sorrow generally - which is a form of lyric poetry. An elegy can also reflect on something which seems strange or mysterious to the author. People often describe an elegy as a lengthened epitaph.<sup>7</sup> The elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead and those grieving, and finally consolation and solace. These three stages can be seen to some extent in many of Tony Harrison's poems, those in which he explores his relationship with his parents and with the working-class society as a whole.

Applying to the contrastive imperatives and sing-song assonance in his poems, Tony Harrison reveals his ideas on various social issues taken from his childhood and youth. However, his colloquial and slang terminology points at his attempts to overcome the confined family upbringing. It was in Leeds Grammar School when Harrison began to withdraw from his parents and eliminate his former values. In the collection of poems, *The Loiners* (1970) that was rewarded with Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, Harrison demonstrates the gap between him and his parents, and between his social background and the acquired education. *Loiners* are native people of Leeds, the place of Harrison's birth. The poet compares these inhabitants with 'loners' (Crucefix, 1997, p.161), people who alienate themselves from education and other aspects of social life. The poems in this collection uncover the feelings of loss and alienation that Harrison experiences because of social ideologies that isolates him from close people when he acquires different culture and ways of communication. In fact, Harrison utilises indecent expressions as sub-cultural pointers that reflect the poet's desire to bring up the issues of society and

<sup>4</sup> <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Colq99/robinson99.htm>; 05-05-2014

<sup>5</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/Harrison\\_transcript.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/Harrison_transcript.shtml); 23-09-2011.

<sup>6</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre); 25-09-2011

<sup>7</sup> <http://elegy.askdefinebeta.com/>; 05-05-2014

culture that trouble him. Tony Harrison realises that his parents will not be able to understand and accept his poetry, but, applying to colloquial speech in his poems, the poet reveals that language can either release or confine a person. The poet depicts this theme in almost all pieces of his creative work through the really brusque poetic speech. His poems and translations show a powerful command of rhyme and an expert adaptation of colloquial speech. Harrison's refined rhyming verse is based on splendid folk alliterations and dialects, revealing the poet's attempts to diversify poetic language.

Tony Harrison distances himself from his family, although he reveals much concern towards the working-class society. In *Book Ends* Harrison depicts that the conflicts between him and his parents are inspired by this working class. According to Kelleher, "Harrison is a poet who opens the case of British class conflict into other geopolitical areas; and... returns a whole range of concerns that might have been considered extraneous to class politics back to class" (1996:43). Throughout the poem Harrison uses mainly monosyllabic, blunt sounding words but mixes them with a variety of short, sharp words. The way in which Harrison has written the poem *Book Ends* i.e. the language he has used, reflects his working, middle class roots, and then his middle class education and life. This makes the poem seem much more personal and helps the audience to identify with Harrison and with the poem itself. The material of much of his poetry is provided by the memories of his working-class childhood. The separation he feels from parents as a result of this is a critical idea expressed in the poem.

There is a keen sense of alienation of the narrator (poet) from his family. The education he received has cut him off from his parents, and what has left for them is "silence and sullen look" (Tony Harrison: Selected Poems 1984, 126) at each other. His family cannot understand him and his books, though he tries to "create new wholes out of that disruption" via poetry. His education has driven a wedge into the family, and he comes to be an outsider of the family instead of a loving member. The alienation is marked by the following contrasts: his parents are lost in silence, whereas his mind "moves upon silence and Aeneid VI." (Tony Harrison: Selected Poems 1984, 115); he turns to be a "scholar" who "slaves at nuances, knows at just one sip/ Chateau Laffite from Chateau Pape", (Tony Harrison: Social Mobility in Tony Harrison: Selected Poems, 1984, 107) eloquent with literary discourses and living in a bourgeoisie style whereas his father "took cold tea for his snap", "worn out on his poor pay" (Tony Harrison: Social Mobility in Tony Harrison: Selected Poems, 1984, 107). In a word, he has been internally colonized by the high-brow culture. As Ken Worpole has explored, the scholarship system "swept through hundreds of thousands of homes each year like an icy wind, and in many places destroyed the cementing ties of families and class relationships, literally dividing families and friends against each other, sometimes forever." (2006:15)

The poem *Book Ends* depicts the inability of a father and a son to talk with each other because of language differences between them. Thus, Harrison uncovers crucial social and political issues beneath his ambiguous and powerful language. As Ellmann and O'Clair put it, Harrison's poetry demonstrates "the jarring dialects of human behaviour" (1988: 1475). Applying to masterfully chosen words and expressions with the Yorkshire dialect, Harrison's *Book Ends* uncovers the issues of existence and changes.

Harrison begins the poem by describing the day of his mother's death; she was baking an apple pie, and then tells of how he and his father ate it. "We chew it slowly that last apple pie" (1984: 126). They are savouring it because it is the last ever pie that the mother will make. The apple pie is used as a metaphor for the mother; it is sweet and soothing. The way in which Harrison portrays his mother (apple pie) indicates strongly that Harrison loved his mother very much and had a good relationship with her. This portrayal is increased a few lines later when Harrison quotes his mother: "You're like bookends, the pair of you" (1984: 126). This quote clearly demonstrates the mother's role within this family. The mother is what holds Harrison and his father together, keeps them talking and acting like father and son. She is like the glue that holds the pages of a book together; without the glue the pages would fall apart. Such an eloquent expression demonstrates the principal idea of the whole poem; although two close people are similar, they are unable to communicate with each other, because they are separated by their different education, language and way of life. After the death of Harrison's mother, their separation is aggravated even more, as the son claims, "A night you need my company to pass / and she not here to tell us we're alike! / Your life's all shattered into smithereens" (1984: 126).

The quote also demonstrates the nature of the relationship between Harrison and his father; bookends have space between them, it is a great metaphor used because it conveys perfectly the relationship the father and son share. It also symbolises the gap between them. Bookends have books between them, just like Harrison and his father. Harrison goes on to compare himself and his father, "The 'scholar' me, you worn out on poor pay" (1984: 126). It demonstrates the difference between them. The father described as 'worn out', the father has had laborious jobs all his life where he has had to work hard to make a living. Harrison the 'scholar' does not have to do physical work because he uses his mind and intelligence to work. This difference actually separates Harrison and his father by class, in becoming an intellectual Harrison has become middle class and no longer lower class like his family.

This becomes very apparent in *Bookends* part two. This part of the poem is about Harrison and his father writing the words to be put on the mother's gravestone. It reveals the tensions between the son and the father. Harrison applies to ironic language, when he discusses the reasons for the separation of the father and the son: "what's still between's not the thirty years or so, but books, books,

books" (1984: 126). The conflict between the two is especially obvious in the scene, when they discuss the words that should be written on mother's tombstone. Harrison tells of how the gravestone is nearly full and then cuts into a quote. "Come on, it's not as if we're wanting verse. It's not as if we're wanting a whole sonnet!" (1984: 126). The father is frustrated that they are having trouble working out what to write on the headstone and takes it out on Harrison. He is making references to sonnets and verse, both forms of literature, referring to Harrison's education and making a point of it. Harrison's father appears to speak with negative emotions, applying to rough words that are characteristic to the working-class speech: "You're supposed to be the bright boy at description / and you can't them what the fuck to put!" (1984: 126). The father utilises such ways of expression, as he is not aware of other ways, but Harrison, whose language is different, refuses to maintain the negative emotions and language of his father, and he answers in a calm voice: "I've got to find the right words on my own" (1984: 126). Thus, the son makes an attempt to communicate with the father, but the son's education prevents him from understanding and supporting the father. The negative emotion exhibited by Harrison's father is his frustration coming to a head; he is upset about his son's difference to him, the education and class. And after all the education and literature his son has experienced he cannot think what to put on the mother's gravestone. This is also painful for Harrison because he knows he can write very well but when it comes to thinking of words to put on his mother's gravestone he cannot find them because he is upset and grieving for his dead mother.

The very last few lines of the poem are after the death of Harrison's father. In the last stanza of the poem Harrison describes the words his father had written on an envelope, he uses words such as "scrawling, mis-spelt, and mawkish," to highlight his father's bad literacy skills. But in the last line Harrison realises that, "I can't squeeze more love onto their stone." (1984: 126). What Harrison is saying is that despite his father's ways and the way that father and son were when together, Harrison realises that his father was full of love for the mother and for Harrison himself, and for his faults Harrison's father was a loving man. Although Harrison admires father's love towards his mother and realises that no words can really express this powerful love, he nevertheless criticises his father for his poor language that does not allow him to reveal his feelings. On the other hand, the poet feels that his knowledge and profession create a sense of alienation and loneliness in him and that language is still limited, because it is not able to embody the subtlety of human emotions and recollections.

The poem *Bookends* has been analysed as a lengthened epitaph, because of the presence of the three stages characteristic of an elegy:

### First Stage

As any elegy would begin with a note of loss, Harrison sets the poem on the day of his mother's death. He

aggravates the feeling of sorrow and grief in an unintentional manner, describing the events of that day.

### Second Stage

The poet enters the second stage of elegy by recalling various incidents connected with his mother – his mother portrayed as soft and soothing, her attempts to bring a mutual bond between the father and the son, she acting like a glue to keep the members of the family together and son on. He also expresses grief that she will no longer be the link between him and his father.

### Third Stage

Throughout the poem Harrison conveys a strained and stolid relationship between him and his father, which becomes more apparent after his mother's death. But towards the last Harrison realises the love that existed strongly within the unrefined man, his father, whom he failed to understand when he was alive. Though at a later stage, the elegy ends with a note of consolation and solace.

In the poem *Long Distance* Harrison continues to demonstrate the conflicts between the father and the son, applying to two different ways of expressions, that is, Standard English utilised by the son and Yorkshire colloquial language maintained by the father. Contrasting these languages, Tony Harrison reveals rather complex language and emotional differences between two persons. However, in the poem the son utilises one word 'Mam' that shows an implicit connection between the son and the father, because this dialect word proves that the son is unable to fully reject his social background and continues to utilise colloquial speech. This small word brings two different personalities together, even though they are unable to come to terms with each other.

The title, *Long Distance* suggests the poem's theme; that of the sense of separation the poet feels on the death of his parents and the way in which he copes with their death. The poem begins in a reminiscent tone portrayed by language such as "Though my mother was already two years dead" (1984: 133). The second line continues this mood and introduces the character of the poet's Dad. The remainder of the first stanza provides several aspects of his father's inability to take in his wife's death: he still warms her slippers by the fire, he puts hot water bottles in the bed for her, and he renews her transport pass. In the second stanza Harrison personally addresses the reader. The effect of the use of 'You, I, he, she' is to create an intensely personal tone to the poem and emotionally connect the reader. Harrison also does this to present his own recollections of how his father would act out a charade - 'He'd put you off an hour to give him time to clear away her things and look alone'. Despite this seeming absurd at one level, the poet has the greatest sympathy for his father's suffering, 'as though his still raw love were such a crime'. It is important that the father pretends to his son that he has come to terms with his wife's passing and reveals a great deal about their relationship. Certainly there was a "long distance" between them emotionally, in some respects, making personal grief

something to hide away beneath the surface: "He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief" (1984: 133). This also means that the father's charade was as much for himself as it was for Harrison. He couldn't risk letting Harrison comprehend just how much he was suffering as this would lead him to having to face his feelings- something which he may not have had the courage to do. The rest of the third stanza deals with Harrison's commentary on his father's desperation and frustration: "though sure that very soon he'd hear her key scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief" (1984: 133). The last stanza, in which the poet describes his own attempts at moving on, has a disrupted rhyme scheme of ABBA. Incidentally, ABBA is the Jewish word for father, showing that the father's death has been preying on the poet's mind, even though he claims to believe "that life ends with death, and that is all"(1984: 133).

The family estrangement and disconnection have been dramatized in this poem: the father in the family keeps the daily practice for the mother, as if she were still alive, and the intimate tie and love are strengthened though she has long passed away. However, the only son in the family, now a poet, cannot simply drop in. "You have to phone", (1984: 133). This word has distanced and cut the son off from the family door. And that he simply "cannot drop in" (1984: 133) sounds more like prohibit, turning down the boy from going home, and consequently the son has been dislocated, and doubting about his identity as the only son in the family. The dead is present every day, whereas the living is disconnected person to person. The distance seems to be geographical and physical, however, the real distance standing between the father and the son is the emotional distance, the alienation enacted by "books". "In my new phone book I write down your name /and the disconnected number I still call" (1984: 133). Though the narrator calls the number, the line is always disconnected because his parents died. He is unable to be identified with his parents when they were alive, and he is still unable to connect with them since they are dead. Therefore, Harrison's dramatization of his working class silence and the bourgeoisie eloquence is embedded with ideological notions. It tells us that the working class has on the one hand been bereft of their speaking power, and on the other hand their offspring, enjoyed with the scholarship, have been colonized with the bourgeoisie moral judgment and value system against their original class. And the most coercive aftermath of it is the permanent alienation of the working class boy from his family.

*Long Distance* too falls into the category of elegy, as it has undoubtedly fulfilled the requirements of the genre:

### **First Stage**

Harrison follows the general outline of an elegy in the first stanza as it represents the first stage of loss. It portrays the father's grief and sorrow by giving examples of meaningless tasks he performs in order to keep her memory alive. By doing this he creates a mask behind which he can hide so that he does not have to face his true feelings.

### **Second Stage**

Harrison mirrors the second stage of loss (i.e. praise and admiration) in the second and third stanzas. Harrison conveys his admiration of the "raw love" which his parents shared and is almost ashamed at the same time as his relationship with his father which was very "long distance".

### **Final Stage**

The third and final stage of loss, which in turn is the final stage of an elegy, should be consolation and solace, some sort of comfort for the reader. However, Harrison instead uses irony in the sense that he explains how he himself is unable to comprehend his father's death (and his mother's) [e.g. "the disconnected number I still call" (1984: 133) ] - something for which he criticised his father earlier on in the poem. He does this to emphasize to the reader the consequences of the broken relationship with his father, something which he cannot mend as his father has passed on, and instead he is left with guilt. Harrison in a sense wastes precious words describing his "new black leather phone book" (1984: 133) in the last stanza which echoes the time he wasted in his lifetime instead of developing his relationship with his father, and is a message for the reader to not do the same.

Another poem of Tony Harrison in which he uses his parents as the central character is *Background Material*. Here again the poet proves that when speaking about his parents the tone is sorrowful, definitely expressing grief. In this poem, unlike the above mentioned ones, Harrison describes the relationship between his parents themselves and not between his parents and himself. He is very subtle in describing his parents' relationship, and the poem is ostensibly about photographs of his parents. It is only when one realizes that there is a deeper meaning, it becomes clear that he is relating his parents to one another

In *Background Material*, Harrison describes two photographs that he has on his desk - one of his mother and the other of his father. The photographs share the same photo frame, and this links his parents together. Harrison describes the photographs, explaining that his father's was taken "in our favourite pub" (1984: 171) whereas his mother's photograph was taken in his garden. The different locations suggest that his parents had different interests and may not have had a very close relationship. Harrison does not directly mention this, although he does make allusions, describing the photographs as "Neither one a couple and both bad" (1984: 171). His parents were however connected through him, their child. "Though one of them's in colour and one's not, / the two are joined, apart from their shared frame" (1984: 171). Harrison goes on to say that this bond is displayed in the photographs, as they both have a technical mistake which "for photographers, would mar each shot" (1984: 171). The blemishes in the photographs were caused by him - in his father's photograph there is a minute image of Harrison and in his mother's there is a shadow, which he had cast. The fact that he refers to the photographs as 'bad' and that the source of

blemishes in them is himself may indicate that Harrison's birth, in fact, was unplanned – he was 'a mistake' – and this also links his parents together. Alternatively, this may just mean that his parents are united through him. Whilst Harrison's parents were connected through his birth, they are also separated by death, as his "father and his background are both gone" (1984: 171).

The tone of the poem is somewhat melancholy; reflecting on the autumn of the poet's parents' lives, but with sad affection rather than any sense of reproach. The earlier lives of the poet's parents are also described to an extent, not just the relationship of parents. For example, in *Background Material*, the photograph of Harrison's mother shows a "Welsh cottage and a wood" (1984: 171) in the background and the photograph of his father was taken in a pub. This indicates that perhaps this is where his parents spent much of their lives. Moreover, the photographs were taken on special occasions, but they are not together in the photographs, as one might expect. "A birthday, him. Their ruby wedding, her." (1984: 171). Following from the idea that Harrison perhaps regards himself as a 'mistake', it is possible that he was the one thing linking his parents and that they were never especially close and did not share similar interests. Nevertheless, there is no sense of any animosity between the two and their marriage evidently endured until their death.

The title can be interpreted in a number of ways. 'Background Material' is somewhat obscure, and could be referring to the fact that Harrison is the background material in his parents' lives. Alternatively, it could mean that his parents were in the background of each other's lives, or it could be relating to the locations in the background of the photographs.

Harrison writes poems about his parents in the present tense and in the first person. This results in the poem being more personal, and it feels as if the poet has opened a part of his life up to the audience. *Background Material* is in free verse, consisting of five uneven stanzas. However, it has a regular rhyming scheme as the alternate lines rhyme and is mostly in iambic pentameter. Harrison's parents may therefore have just had different interests, as opposed to a poor relationship. The poet uses metaphors in this poem in order to describe the parents' relationships. In *Background Material*, the photographs are an extended metaphor for Harrison's parents' lives. This means that at first, the true meaning of the poem is ambiguous, as it could be mistaken for a poem about photographs. Harrison uses enjambment to link the last three stanzas of *Background Material*. The last two stanzas each relate to just one of his parents, therefore the use of enjambment links both the stanzas and Harrison's parents together. Moreover, Harrison is describing the flaws caused by him in the photographs, so the link between the stanzas due to the enjambment shows that his parents are linked through him. Harrison also uses caesura, creating pauses to allow the reader to reflect on what he is saying. The pauses also emphasize the differences between the poet's parents, "A birthday, him.

Their ruby wedding, her." In *Background Material*, the pauses create a sense of time, showing that Harrison is remembering his parents and their relationship.

In conclusion, Harrison describes the relationship between his parents and to some extent, his own lives; however, he does so using a very different method. Harrison only alludes obliquely to about his parents' relationship. This is even reflected in the title of the poem. The parents in *Background Material* are linked by their child (the poet). Harrison does not appear resentful of his parents' relationship, but there is a rather melancholic feeling in it. This is because he is describing the latter stages of his parents' life and there is an unspoken affection towards them.

This poem, as the above mentioned ones expresses an elegiac tone. The structure proves the presence:

### First Stage

From the beginning Tony Harrison describes the strained relationship between his parents through their photographs. He states that though the photographs are united by the frame, the background material as well as the interests of the characters in it differs. As he mentions the gap between his father and mother, a sense of grief is felt.

### Second Stage

Harrison's intention of taking up two different photographs of his parents in which they appear as sole characters is to highlight the void between them. The structure of free verse is also a hint at the unstable relationship they shared. However, he admires the way his parents choose to keep up their relationship in spite of the difference in their fields of interest.

### Third Stage

The presence of the poet in both photographs is considered to be a flaw by photographers but Harrison is happy to have been the link between his parents. He expresses his hidden love for both his mother as well as his father. This expression provides him with consolation and solace.

## 4. Conclusion

In an interview with *The Guardian*, when asked 'What of Harrison's own perception of his legacy?' he replied, "Well, like anyone, I hope the people who knew me will talk about me over a bottle of wine after I've gone. But what I'm proud of is that I can read poems about my parents in Leeds or Bradford, and men especially are suddenly sobbing in the audience. That a short poem has touched them that deeply and brings that kind of response is better than a rave review."<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is clearly evident that Tony Harrison takes pride

<sup>8</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre); 20-10-2011

<http://www.essays.uk.com/essays/literature-essays/tony-harrison-colloquial-terminology.php> <http://www.teachit.co.uk/>

in writing about his parents and about his working class background than in anything else. With strong awareness of class distinction and cultural difference, oppressed by the ruling discourse, disillusioned with his inarticulate parents, suffered from the alienations connected with language and education as well as his origin, Harrison knows well the vital importance of articulation and wants to make it known to the world. He tends to contextualize the combats through different tones: the language and cultural combats between the bourgeoisies and the working-class through the voices of the unrefined, the education combats between him and his family through the voices of the silent and the eloquent; the inner combats through the melancholic tone. In these elegiac discourses, the dialogic interactions, the authentic sphere where language lives, are dramatically presented and all the dialogic relationships are permeated throughout all the discourses. These discourses marked with sorrow and grief is ideologically embedded, different social milieus and positions are collided and embattled at every shade of meaning and in every syntactic structure. With this weapon, Tony Harrison keeps his poetry to the public orientation and attempts to set up a poetic discourse for his silent and inarticulate class, and all these make his poetry about his parents full of realistic significance. This may be a key formulation of his wide acknowledgement and acceptance as one of the most important poets today in the contemporary English poetry circles.

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