

From Long Distance

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Biography

- **Tony Harrison** (born April 30, 1937) is an English poet. He was born in Leeds and educated at Leeds Grammar School and the University of Leeds; where he read Classics and took a diploma in Linguistics, which undoubtedly had an impact on his works. For some years he has lived in Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne. In 2004 he was the third winner of the Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award.
- 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. His poems and translations show a powerful command of rhyme and an expert adaptation of colloquial speech.

From Long Distance

Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
put hot water bottles her side of the bed
and still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
to clear away her things and look alone
as though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He *knew* she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
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.

Style

- The poem comprises of 16 lines ordered into 4 quatrains
- Has an ABAB CDCD EFEF ABBA rhyme scheme
- Follows the outline of an elegy-we'll focus on this particularly, later on.

Analysis

- The 'Long Distance' of the title 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*"
- 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, 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*")

- 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") The "*knew*" is in italics to emphasise this idea as it slows down the reader and allows the eye to distinguish between that particular word and the rest of the poem.

- 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".

Elegy

- 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

- 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 “*From Long Distance*”

Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
put hot water bottles her side of the bed
and still went to renew her transport pass.

First Stage: *Speaker
expresses grief and sorrow*

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
to clear away her things and look alone
as though his still raw love were such a crime.

Second Stage: *Admiration
of those who are lost and
those who remain to mourn*

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
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.

Third Stage:
*Consolation and
solace*

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 intern 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") something which he criticised his father for earlier on in the poem.

- He does this to emphasise 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” in the last stanza which in my opinion 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.