

“Boys from the Blackstuff”

“Yosser’s Story”

‘Boys from the Blackstuff’ was the first television series by Liverpool playwright Alan Bleasdale. It captured the public mood in 1982 when it was first shown on BBC2, at a time of anxiety about unemployment. Set in Liverpool, it showed the attempts of five men to find work in a city hit hard by unemployment and depression.

Of the five central characters, Chrissie was the most ordinary, desperate for work and constantly pressured by the insecurity of life on the dole. Other characters included Loggo, Dixie, George and Yosser.

When we first see Yosser Hughes, we see him as very unstable, a man with problems who is very aggressive and insecure. This is because he has lost his job as well as many other things including his wife. We are not the only ones who think Yosser comes across as an unstable man with problems, some of his work colleagues think he’s a bit mad; even Chrissie, who normally sticks up for everyone and supports his friends says ‘he’s off his cake...’ (“Jobs for the boys”)

As we move through the play we tend to feel more and more sympathetic towards Yosser, this is based on his losses; first his job, then his wife, his kids in his dream, his electricity, his possessions, his children, his house and finally his identity. Right at the end of the play he is left with nothing. This supports our feelings of sympathy for him

Scene 2 is set in Sefton park, Yosser is dreaming that he is losing his children, with his friends around him in boats who won’t help, ‘Boys, boys, boys I’m losing my children...’ they all ignore him, they don’t seem to take any notice of him. This scene suggests that Yosser is very worried at the possibility of this reality. One by one his children disappear into the water below them. I think his dream is a premonition of what’s to come; it reveals his greatest fears, such as losing his children and also his identity. It’s also symbolic towards what happens towards the end – he tries to kill himself in a lake. The first scene ends up being *déjà vu*. Alan Bleasdale uses this dream as a metaphor for Yosser drowning in his sea of troubles.

Scene 8 is also set in a park, we see a happy family consisting of a mother, father and three children who are playing together on the swings, ‘enjoying themselves’ Yosser and his children are sitting beneath a tree watching the family as they play. The children amuse themselves. Dustin is playing with a stick, this suggests that he is easily pleased and that he doesn’t have many toys of his own. Yosser finds watching the happy family that he can’t have frustrating, everything he sees in the ‘happy family’ is the exact opposite of what he’s got i.e. Happy family – broken family, clean – dirty, happy – sad, it is also very clear that he is jealous of them by the way he head butts the tree four times to get rid of his anger that has been building up inside him whilst watching the family. As Yosser butts the tree we see a magpie fly by, this symbolises sorrow and almost foresees what is about to come. He wishes he were like them, a happy family with a normal

lifestyle. At this point the children are starting to get worried, 'what are we going to do?' This makes us feel sympathetic towards the children and not just Yosser.

In scene 10 we see Yosser trying to persuade Maureen to come home. Maureen's strength is not enough to hold him back, she gets forced against a lamppost. After Yosser's pleas 'come home, please' for Maureen to return to the house and pick up the role of mum he leans back as if to butt Maureen but at the last minute moves her to the side and butts the lamppost. We get the impression, once again, that he is emotionally unstable by the way he head butts the lamppost. This scene is quite moving because it is the only time we see him and his wife together. This scene reveals his true feelings for her. The way Maureen responds to Yosser makes the audience distressed for him. She laughs in his face and says 'For Christ's sake leave me alone you bastard, I don't want you anymore'. But the main reason we feel sympathetic towards Yosser and his kids in this scene is because of the two lines said by his kids. Anne Marie says: 'she used to be our mummy', Dustin replies: 'I know'. These two lines are very moving. They are spoken without pathos so it makes it out that they are saying it in a very realistic manner. It shows they still remember her and deep down still love her, as I think does Yosser. He can't let her go.

Scene 18 is where Yosser meets Graeme Souness at the pub. As soon as Yosser enters the pub, all the liveliness and excitement in the pub dies down and there is a sense of tension. This probably has something to do with his appearance, which is dirty, smelly, and un-shaven. All these faults suggest that Yosser is an outcast. Graeme Souness's impressions of Yosser might also be that he's an outcast and that he's on the border of insanity he gets this impression by what Yosser says: 'I could have been a footballer, but I had a paper round' We realise in this scene that Yosser has changed a lot over the years. As a youngster he was full of ambition but this seems to have disappeared miserably. He acts like a big man in the other scenes always repeating 'I'm Yosser Hughes'. After asking Graeme Souness for his autograph he feels happy about himself. He's happy that someone famous has noticed him and given something in return. Normally the autograph given to Yosser would be for a child, but here we see Dustin smiling in the background at the delight on his dad's face in receiving the autograph. This almost becomes a role reversal.

In scene 24 Yosser meets the Wino. Yosser starts talking but the Wino isn't listening, it doesn't even look as though he cares, he's much too interested in his 'disinfectant'; 'leave my disinfectant alone'. Yosser tells him about his dream and how he used to build sandcastles; 'I built sandcastles, and sometimes I think that's all I've ever done'. I think that Yosser means he tries his best at everything but in the end they just collapse over and over again just like waves going over a sandcastle and collapsing. As a child Yosser's life was full of dreams and ambition. He had so much planned for his life ahead of him. He thought there was so much to look forward to in life. It's ironic really, his life was full of dreams but now it's quite clearly not. He has nothing. I think Yosser is feeling sorry for himself, he feels he hasn't accomplished anything in his life. For example his job, wife and friends have all collapsed and disappeared, because of this, his outlook of life has changed, he has no dreams anymore. This scene makes us feel sympathetic towards him because once you have no dreams you will not accomplish anything in life.

In scene 29, Yosser tries to confess to the priest in church. It's a waste of time, he comes out feeling twice as bad as when he went in. We know this because at the end of this scene, Yosser bangs his head on the wooden frame inside the confessional box and the crucifix above him drops and falls on his head, it's almost as though God is punishing or even rejecting him as well. At the beginning of the scene we see a priest in his mid thirties sitting in an armchair within the confessional box. By his side there is a book titled: 'A book of Irish wit and humour' and a bag of jelly babies. These items are not usually found in a confessional box, which questions our faith in the priest. Bathos is used in this scene. The confessional box is considered in the Catholic Church to be a very serious place, yet the priest is sitting on the other side eating jelly babies. As it is, the priest is not much use to Yosser anyway.

Yosser's children are taken away from him in scene 34. This makes us feel deeply sympathetic towards him because his children are the only things he has left in his life. When the social workers from the social services come to take them away it results in Yosser feeling suicidal. It's as though his kids are the only things that keep him alive, '...You can't care for them like I care for them.' From this, we know that his feelings for his children are very strong but before the social services take the children the police turn up at the house punching the social workers aside (scene's 35, 36 and 37). They break into his house and beat Yosser with their truncheons. We feel sympathetic towards Yosser as even though he is breaking the law the police are using unnecessary violence. At first, Yosser tries his hardest to fight off the policemen. The policemen however come across very unsympathetic. Yosser eventually gives up all efforts to fight them off when he realises he is seriously out numbered. Using their truncheons, they seem to be enjoying the fact that they are seriously injuring someone. This questions our faith in the police force because we think that they are there to help stop violence and crimes, not commit them themselves. This massively increases our sympathy through the mere injustice and exploitation of the authorities.

In scene 45, after Yosser has lost his children, Yosser feels that there is nothing left in his life so his last resort is to commit suicide. It's rather significant that he fails because he's failed in everything. So the fact that he's failed in committing suicide is quite pathetic. We again feel sympathetic towards him because his life is the one thing that he can control himself and even the chance to rest in peace is taken away from him. We notice in this scene that it's set in the same lake as the first and second where Yosser is dreaming about his kids drowning. This is quite ironic.

I think that Yosser deserved most of the sympathy he gets from his audience although he does bring on most of the things that happen to him. If he had had his sanity and didn't think that he was the big man, proud to be himself 'I'm Yosser Hughes' then I think he may still have had his wife, kids and his house. I found scene's 35 – 37 most moving because of the way he was prepared to fight the police force to keep his kids. They obviously meant a lot to him.

When we think of Yosser Hughes we think of the saying 'gizza a job'. This is because Yosser thinks his life will be a lot better if he was employed. He tries many jobs throughout the plays of Alan Bleasdale, like putting the nets up on a sports field for example. We know that he is use less at everything, and I think this makes us sympathise towards him.

The scenes presented also manipulate us in visual ways. The happy family scene does not need words to make us realise what is happening. The way the family are enthusiastically playing on the swings, this increases Yosser's frustration. The family play with smiles on their faces and this makes us feel for Yosser because we can see how happy they are. Bleasdale also uses shadow and sunlight to symbolise happiness and sadness.

The way Yosser ends up is very different to how he started. When he had his children he had something to live for, now he doesn't care. The scene when he breaks the window makes us realise that. We can't see how he will survive without his children. Yosser says: 'I thought I knew where I was going once. I did. But there's nowhere left to go cos it's all...' this makes us realise that he tries but somehow he never manages it.

I think after reading 'Yosser's story' or indeed watching it, the audience is left with a number of thoughts about the story. They feel more sympathetic towards the people who are on the dole and understand them more and the troubles that they go through.

It is said that Yosser was 'more sinned against than sinning'. I think there are good comparisons in this play like the family scene; this shows a life that Yosser wanted to have. There are also scenes that in other situations we wouldn't feel sorry for him, but because of all that's happened to him, we do feel sympathy towards him. We also look up to him in a way because he's got certain aims in life like wanting to look after his children. We see that this is hard for him, but we still want it to work for him so that he's happy.

So, overall we see Bleasdale manipulating us to feel sorry for Yosser, because we are almost blocked from looking at the story from another point of view.