

Write a comparison on the ways that social class differences are presented in “Journey’s End” and “A Long Long Way”

From the start, Sherriff’s play “Journey’s End” and Barry’s novel “A Long Long Way” present two very different social class viewpoints of the Great War. Sherriff’s play focuses on the viewpoint of the public school educated officers of the “C Company” and Barry presents his novel through the eyes of an ordinary Irish boy, Willie Dunne, who not having reached the height required for him to follow his father into the police force, opted to volunteer for the war. The biggest difference between both texts is the language. The novel’s narrative focalisation often shows the working class viewpoint of Willie whereas the play is full of public school register. The reader and the audience are aware, as a result of the difference in social class views and are provided with ample opportunities to compare the differences in both texts.

Both the texts are a reflection of the times they were written. The play being written just after the war and during a time where theatre-going was a solely upper class phenomenon would not have been at all popular if it was focused on the lives of the working class soldiers rather than the lives of the officers. Similarly, the text being very much a modern novel makes use of social changes and therefore has no qualms about portraying the true nature of working class soldiers. Also, novels are not restricted to a particular social class of people, especially in this modern day and age, where the class differences have become increasingly blurred.

The first few pages of both texts are an indication of the opinion of the respective writers as well as those portrayed in the texts. “A Long Long Way” starts with a dark and somewhat bleak picture of the streets of Dublin. With its rain-lashed streets and its cabmen huddling in their “mucky gabardines” it is the epitome of the harsh grind of working class life. The language is very earthy and realistic in the sense that it does not detract from the reality of the maternity ward in hospitals circa the late 19th century. The babies who cried like “wounded cats” in the laps of the nurses with their “aprons of butchers” in the hospital with its stony “ox-skulls and draperies” facade resembles in the reader’s mind the image of abattoirs. It is very much a working class setting for the reader to delve into. On the other hand, “Journey’s End” could not be any more different. It starts off with a conversation between the outgoing company commander and the 2nd Lieutenant of the incoming company. It is filled with public school register and very controlled language. It most importantly displays the classic “stiff upper lip” nature of the British upper classes. Hardy commenting on the soldiers being “frightfully annoyed” with dirt in their tea after a bomb, is such an example. This is therefore

an explicit illustration of the differences between social class within the interactions and the lives of the Officers and the “ordinary men”.

Social class differences portrayed within the texts are also evident. “Journey’s End”, a play from the Officers’ stance, is very much discriminatory towards the generally working class soldiers. The army in those days consisted of two groups, the Officers and the “men”. Stanhope is very insistent on the dividing line between the two groups. He, as part of the upper class system, seems to consider the loyal soldiers under his command as separate from his staff, comprising of the lieutenants. His objective view of the soldiers below him is what causes him to separate them and portray them to the audience as a completely different entity. His reference to the soldiers as “the men” as well as his incredulity at Raleigh “feeding” with the men is an illustration of his sense of superiority and separate nature from the common soldiers. Whereas, in “Journey’s End” the commanding officers as well the lower ranking officers remain aloof and separate from the soldiers, “A Long Long Way” presents a much more humanitarian side to the company commanding officers.

Captain Pasley accompanying Clancy, O’Hara and Willie for a swim in the river running through the reserve lines is something that the audience cannot picture Stanhope doing. The company captains in “A Long Long Way” are much more liberal. Talking about the “big liming job” as well as “bawling out those happy words”,

“Can you sling them on your shoulder
Like a lousy fucking soldier
Do your balls hang low?”

seems something common soldiers would sing about. However, it is Captains Pasley and Sheridan, respectively, who talk about the farming or sing songs that are popular with the men, with obvious enthusiasm. One observation that comes to mind is that in “Journey’s End” the company officers are English, whereas in “A Long Long Way” the company commanders are Irish as well as the “men”. It would seem that the rural nature of Ireland was the overriding factor, that an Irishman coming out of Sandhurst would never be the same as a middle or upper-class Englishman.

It can be seen within the two texts that social class differences even play a role in a person’s sense of honour and duty. “Journey’s End” being a play based on the experience of the officers in a company, one would have presumed that the sense of honour and duty would be prevalent throughout. However, this is not the case. We see that Hardy is not at all concerned with any proper sense of honour and duty. His duty to his country manifests itself in his enquiry about looking “every inch the soldier”. However, this is

contrasted by Osborne's strong sense of duty. He is dutiful and very loyal to Stanhope while Hardy being the shirking type, incredulously remarks Osborne is "fussy" and "God! you are a worker". This difference is seen within the same class system. Both of them are obviously not working class soldiers but their attitudes on honour and duty differ. It therefore stands to reason that there will be such differences, if not more contrasting ones, from either side of the line. The audience is not disappointed, but the differences are somewhat unexpected.

Hibbert, an officer of the company, is a weak and ineffectually individual. From the start Sherriff immediately establishes him as someone that does not contribute fully to the team, and because of this, we do not feel sympathy for him. In contrast to this, Mason, a fighting soldier, acts as a cook and as well as a servant. He is evidently hard-working and keen to serve, and Osborne and Trotter discussing his dirty dishcloth also provides some light humour. Mason serves as a reminder that normal activities still need to continue, and his all-round good nature endears the audience to him. He obviously has no fears of stepping on to the front line from the relative safety of his dug-out kitchen. When Stanhope tells him to finish up in the kitchen and join the platoon "in the line"; his reply is a simple and straightforward "very good, sir."

Having seen the differences that an individual's social class can have on their outlook on not only life, but also how it affect their dealings with others as well as their commitment and contribution to life in the trench; it is obviously the case that the two social classes will behave differently.

We see in "A Long Long Way" the true nature of the ordinary soldiers. The use of foul language as well as the very realistic portrayal of men dealing with their fellow men is most apparent in the interaction of Willie, Christy Moran the Sergeant Major and Pete O'Hara. The sexual realism that is portrayed, such as Willie's need to masturbate to stop himself from exploding "worse than any bomb" is also a depiction of how the common soldiers behaved. The novel's Sergeant Major, the highest ranking soldier amongst the "men", is by far the "truest" soldier amongst his men. He is a full time soldier and as a result he sees no problem in using foul language on a frequent basis. Even the most simple of directions or observations have to be interspersed with a "fucking" or a "shite". But despite the rough demeanour, the soldiers liked him, "all the guff and gristle that he was". However, when this is compared to the captains of Willie's company, it would seem that their behaviour is as varied as they themselves. Captain Pasley is portrayed as the typical upper-class officer. He is seemingly unaware of the risks that come with raising your head above the parapet with "alarming indifference". However this could just be the typical bravado displayed by middle and upper-class men, who would suffer unbearably, sometimes for no good reason, rather than show any sign of weakness.

His observation that the night and land are “beautiful” and of the river that he is sure is “absolutely full of trout” is all a caricature and Barry mocking his obvious public school upbringing.

The other captain of the company, Captain Sheridan, is however vastly different. He has a “very merry way about him” and is insistent on keeping troop morale high. This he does by singing songs whilst on the march. He is sufficiently versed in the working class nature of the soldiers to enjoy singing “Charlotte the Harlot” and “Do your Balls Hang Low”.

On the other hand, Sherriff’s “Journey’s End” does not at all mirror the way Barry has written his novel or his presentation of characters from two different social classes. The behaviour of the various characters within the play, compared to the novel, is very frigid. There is no interaction between the regular soldiers and the officers of the company. Trotter and Mason, both working class soldiers, although Trotter has been promoted to a Lieutenant, are in a sense breaths of fresh air amongst the very reserved atmosphere that can be felt within the dugout. As the play’s central focus is on public school life, talk of rugby, cricket and schoolmasters, acts as a bond between the men. It helps the upper-class soldiers deal with the stresses of war if they think of the war as an extension of their public school-life. With public-schools at the time being single-sex establishments, the men having to live and work together in the small space of a dugout would not have been too fazed because they would have had undoubtedly shared rooms back in school.

Such a shared background is clearly significant. Osborne measures distances by relating them to rugby fields and Raleigh relates his fatal injury to one he suffered whilst playing rugby. It is for them a way to escape from all the horrors of the war. As a result, it would seem that the rest of the officers stay aloof from either Trotter or Mason. To some extent, the separation between them and Mason is justifiable, in the sense that servant and officers don’t mix. But Trotter, who is also an officer, cannot escape the stereotype associated with him by his public-school bred colleagues. He is seen by the others as a “genuine sort of chap” who “makes things feel natural”. Stanhope thinks he has no imagination and believes that Trotter is “always the same” or “never get sick to death of everything”. It is obvious that Trotter has come to terms with the slightly patronising behaviour and the presumed lack of intelligence he has to endure within the army. He shows his fierce commitment and loyalty when he is made second in command. He evidently feels honoured by the promotion and promises Stanhope that he will do his best and not let him down.

The social class difference also transcends into the way the soldiers and officers talk to each other. In “Journey’s End”, the two main working class characters are Mason and Trotter. Mason speaks in a Cockney accent and Sherriff indicates this through the spelling and dropped letter at both the beginning as well as the end of words. The meat that he serves at the beginning of the play has a “noo shape” and “asn’t got that smooth wet look” that liver has. Trotter also speaks differently from the other officers. His use of the phrase

"I reckon" where Raleigh and the others would use "I suppose" is a clear example of this. His exclamations are more frequent as well. They consist of "damn" and "bloomin'" as well as "blinkin'" whereas the other officers would say things like "beastly", "frightfully" and, very rarely, "damned". Another clear illustration of this is when Trotter comes to see Osborne just before the raid. His simple, yet crude rhymes contrast with Osborne's evocative references to "Alice in Wonderland". Trotter declaims, "Tell me, mother, what is that / That looks like strawberry jam?" / 'Hush, hush my dear; 'tis only Pa / Run over by a tram..." with its obvious reference to death. While in contrast, Osborne talks of the "gently smiling jaws" of the "little crocodile", with a more subdued indication of life and death. The two officers have different ways of expressing their response to the war. Where Trotter explicitly refers to the situation; Osborne, on the other hand, refers to it in a more controlled and implicit way, typical of most public-school characters.

Moving away from the war for just a moment, it is clear that where in the trenches, social class played a major role in the way soldiers were treated by one another, it also meant that lives outside before the war were very different, to say the least. The rich upper-class, public-school educated boys would all have had their lives set out for them. For some, the war came as a welcome break from the monotonous and dreary, controlled and restrained lifestyle. For many, it was an adventure. It was a way for them to go and see the world. What also helped was the fact that many of these "young lads" had some sort of Combined Cadet Force training, very much in line with the old Imperial tradition.

However, for the working-class "men", some had no choice but to go. It was for them a way of not only gaining recognition but also a way of earning money to feed the hungry mouths within their homes. It was for some, a lifeline. It was a way to make something out of their lives. It would have been an amazing story to tell the grandchildren by the fire. Many went for aesthetic reasons, and had help making decisions from the countless pro-war propaganda campaigning that was going on. One such advert with the slogan, 'Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War', would have no doubt sent many a young father off to the War, some destined never to return.

The life of the upper-class, public-school soldiers is clearly showed in "Journey's End". Osborne was a schoolmaster who refereed "Rugger" games. His revelation that he played for the Harlequins as well as for England on "one great occasion" is greeted with an almost reverent "Oh, but, good Lord! that must have been simply topping" from Raleigh. In comparison, Willie from "A Long Long Way" is but a mere builder working for Dempsey, the most renowned construction contractor in Dublin. This again shows in full force the gap between the working-class soldiers and their public-school counterparts.

In conclusion, it can be seen that social class differences played a major role in how men acted and were treated within the army. Both the texts have a wide variety of differences with regards to the social class differences within the soldiers of one company. However, it must be noted that in a way, the war made all that difference worthless. The great shadow of Death did no differentiate between who had a public-school upbringing in Eton or Repton and who was brought up on a farm or in the slums on the outskirts of Dublin. Perhaps this is why towards the end of the war the line dividing the public-schooled upper classes from the common working class man became increasingly blurred. This is shown in both texts, with Trotter, a working-class soldier, being promoted to second in command of the C Company; and in "A Long Long Way", with Christy Moran being made the surrogate captain of the Dublin Fusiliers. At the start of the First World War, only men who were public-school educated could be commissioned officers. However, as can be seen from both texts, the class system was changing and the traditional officer class no longer existed. After the first year of the war, it became possible to gain promotion without having to be privately educated. It would seem that this is how Sherriff himself became a captain in the East Surrey regiment. But it did not stop there. After World War II, the people of Britain had become exasperated with the right-wing, middle-class dominated Conservative party. The political party of Churchill was overthrown by the people in favour of a more socialist party. A party, that was devoted to the fairness and equality that was demanded by so many of the people in Britain. This serves to illustrate exactly how social class attitudes can change in the face of trials and tragedy. Britain underwent a massive social change and in 1945, twelve weeks after the end of the War, the socialist, left-wing Labour party won the national election in an amazing landslide; such that it was equated to a political earthquake.