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How accurate is Bleasdale's portrayal of family life in the 1980's in 'Boys from the Blackstuff'?

It is the 1980s. Britain's working class are suffering due to high unemployment and a bleak and depressing world recession. The mood of the general public, especially the unemployed, is one of despair and resignation, coupled with the fact that the government do not understand their hopeless predicament. Then, amongst the riots and protests breaking out all over the country, a new and extremely relevant drama is aired on the BBC. 'Boys from the Blackstuff' by Alan Bleasdale, a series depicting the effects unemployment has on family life, is immediately popular, among audiences and critics alike. This is mainly because of its startling similarities to Britain at the time, enabling the general public to relate to the scripts in one way or another. The Anglican Bishop of Liverpool (the setting of 'Boys from the Blackstuff'), Reverend David Sheppard commented, 'it's about people with great gifts and abilities being robbed of a chance to use them'. This reflected the situation of many families at this time.

Unemployment had varying effects on the relationships between husband and wife. While some couples were brought closer together by their troubles, many family bonds became strained and volatile.

The Todd's are a good example of a family with problems like these. They suffered from many petty arguments - in one instance, Chrissie said to Angie,

'I said shut up,'

to which Angie replies,

'Why should I shut up? You started it.'

These arguments occurred regularly in the Todd household, deteriorating their relationship further as time went on.

It is apparent that the Todd's problems are due to unemployment as it is unemployment that makes Chrissie feel so emasculated and second-class. The fact that the gas board come to cut off the gas supply can be seen as a metaphor for his feelings of lack of masculinity. This is amplified when Angie says to him,

'I can't cut out off what you haven't got'

As a result of comments like these, Chrissie continues to feel worthless, venting his frustrations on Angie, straining their relationship further.

Although Angie's comments seem harsh and unfeeling, they are only there because of the affection Chrissie and she are losing along with their food, money, and Angie's dreams of a good, honest life. She is a result embittered and resentful. Chrissie too feels the effect of the hardships they face- he says,

'...where do you go from bread - how about breadwinner?'

This play on words follows a scene where Angie berates Chrissie after he eats the last three slices of bread, all that was left for the children's breakfast. Their impoverished situation is augmented by Bleasdale's use of dramatic convention at this point. The scene switches to focus on Miss Sutcliffe, employed as a DHSS worker. As well as the bottles of wine and expensive food seen around the kitchen, the viewer also sees her eating breakfast surrounded by a variety of top quality breakfast foods, and all for just a single person. This drastic comparison highlights the hardships caused by unemployment in the 1980s.

Like Chrissie, Yosser Hughes also feels a lack of masculinity, after losing his job, wife and eventually his sanity. He is unable to come to terms with he and his wife's separation and believes they are still together. Maureen Hughes is eventually driven to say to him,

'For Christ sake, leave me alone you bastard, I don't want you anymore.'

Again it is due to unemployment that he and his wife are separated - if he sill had hi job, they would still be together and Yosser would still have his sanity.

Maureen as a result has a very low opinion of her husband. When talking to the Social Services, she comments,

'...he always thought he was going to be somebody, when he really was nothing'

Her portrayal of Yosser is very different to the Yosser the audience sees. By lying to the Social Services about the way he treated the children, she feels as though she is getting revenge on him for losing his job and all their money. Her description however, is an indication of the character Bleasdale has created in Yosser Hughes, the character of the fool.

Another example of this characteristic is when Yosser meets Graham Souness in the pub. He says repeatedly,

'I'm Yosser Hughes,'

The use of repetition implies that he needs to validate himself as a person in order to feel like he is worth something, as well as portraying the character of the fool.

Dixie and his wife Freda are also adversely affected by the problems unemployment causes. Both husband and wife are committing benefit fraud (hence the title of the episode, 'Moonlighter'), a situation that leaves Dixie feeling resentful and frustrated. He often takes it out on Freda, or treats her like a child. An example of such treatment was when Freda wanted to go and warn her friends about the DHSS, but Dixie objected. He said,

'You go see other girls, right? Bad man with binoculars see you, right?'

By talking down to Freda and patronizing her in this manner he feels as though he is pushing himself upwards in the household hierarchy, as well as hanging on to what little masculinity he has left.

Bleasdale also uses the language of the area and era to further implement the idea that Dixie and Freda have an unbalanced and unfair relationship. Dixie often refers to her as,

'girl' or 'my tart'

Although he may mean it as a term of endearment, the audience generally see it as derogatory and another indication that the Dean's relationship is degrading due to their respective unemployment.

The patriarchal character of George Malone is a stark contrast with the behaviour of families like the Todds and the Deans. It is clear that George commands a certain respect through his extended family bonds, whether it is the differing language used when George is in the vicinity or the fact that his arrival is the only thing that can stop a bitter argument between Chrissie and Angie. He is also a role model for the relationship that many of the families in 'Boys from the Blackstuff' longed for - the Malones treat each other with respect and love, which is clear in the scene showing George's return from the hospital. Mrs Malone says to him,

'Hello love, hello pet, welcome home.'

The fact that Bleasdale includes the Malones in the drama proves further that Bleasdale creates an accurate portrayal of family life in the 1980s, as it was not all depression and hardship, making the drama much more realistic.

Unemployment also affected the relationships between parents and children. Whilst their parents fought, their children gained an extremely pessimistic view of the world and also lost a lot of respect in their parents. This was especially the case in the Dean household. Freda would often complain,

‘They just don’t listen to me.’

Because of the lack of respect in their elders, the children of unemployed parents have little confidence in their own abilities to find unemployment. Danny, the Dean’s 16-year-old son, commented,

‘y’ need nuclear physics to be a bin man these days.’

The implication is that school is futile for all but the very intelligent. It also gives a sense of absolute hopelessness, a common occurrence in families in the 1980s.

Families with small children had different problems, especially when trying to disguise the fact that the family unit was falling apart. Scenes like when Chrissie and Angie Todd physically fight over Chrissie’s inability to find unemployment were common during the 1980s, again showing Bleasdale’s success in creating an accurate portrayal of family life. The audience knows that the parents love their children as they try to shield such scenes from them - Chrissie says,

‘Its all right, Justine. Me and Mummy are just playing at wrestling.’

Bleasdale again uses dramatic convention at this point to further convey the point that the family do love and care for each other, when the audience see Chrissie, Angie and the girls well wrapped up watching television. This addition again makes the drama more realistic as it shows all aspects of family life, not just the bad ones.

Another example of the protective and nurturing behaviour shown by unemployed parents is found when the audience witnesses George Malone talking to one of his granddaughters about his impending death. When asked what it felt like to die, he replied,

‘Nobody knows, kidder. It’s like...the next episode of...Spiderman. Nobody knows what its like...until it happens.’

The fact that George plays down the severity of death shows that he loves his children and grandchildren and tries to protect them from the worst things in life.

Bleasdale also creates a loving family unit in the Hughes, despite the absence of the children’s mother and their

impoverished situation. It is clear that Yosser loves his children and wants the best for them. He says,

‘When you were born...I was all right then...without me you...’ However, although Yosser believes that he is doing the best for his children by keeping them out of the reach of the Social Services, he is actually achieving the opposite. By stopping them from going to school and out of contact with children of their own age, the children’s social skills degrade and disappear. This is apparent when Anne-Marie, Yosser’s daughter, head butts the social worker as she tries to take her away from her father. It also proves that Yosser has inadvertently set a bad example for his children, therefore the Social Services were right to take them away.

It was not just the children of unemployed parents that suffered during the recession of the 1980s. Miss Sutcliffe, a DHSS worker was a character shown with an elderly and senile mother. By showing the problems they experienced, such as the pranks Mrs Sutcliffe played on her daughter, Bleasdale creates a human side to the DHSS, who were often portrayed as unfeeling automatons.

In this way, Bleasdale accurately portrays family life in the 1980s as by creating the different family units the audience sees all aspects of the suffering and hardship people encountered. By showing the point of view of those that are happily employed as well as those that are impoverished and destitute the drama is much more realistic and true to life.