Volume 2: 2009-2010 ISSN: 2041-6776

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Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

The Art of being Working Class

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Part One

Richard Hoggart greeted the people who had arrived for his one-off advertised seminar. He was disappointed there were only three men waiting, but he greeted them all with a welcoming smile. They sat, introduced themselves to one another, and Hoggart opened the discussion.

RH: Good afternoon everyone, and welcome. I hope you're all as excited about this unique seminar as I am. I'd like to introduce my colleague, Clare, who'll be recording and taking notes today, for publication in our University Alumni Newsletter, of which you'll each receive a copy as well.

A *woman sitting in the far corner of the room, surrounded by stacks of papers, with a recording device on her lap, smiled at the group of men sitting around the table.*

RH: I'd like to use this seminar to discuss the question 'What is it to be working-class?' So, as an opening, are you all here because you consider yourselves working-class?

The three men nodded and two opened their mouths to speak. William Price, excited to be in a seminar, rather than his comparatively solitary university office, spoke first.

WP: Yes, I'm from a working-class background. I was brought up in Glynmawr, a village in Wales, where my father worked on the railway. My parents moved there before I was born. They were also raised close to the English border, so I'm firmly rooted in the Welsh working-class tradition.

RH: I see. You specifically said you're *from a working-class background*, not that you *are working-class*. Is there a difference?

WP: Well, yes, I suppose so. I mean, now I'm a university academic and live in London, my life isn't really what you'd call working-class any more. But you never lose your background.

RH: So, in terms of class, what *are* you, exactly?

Price had asked himself the same question many times, but he had no answer. He hesitated and in the meantime Arthur Seaton answered for him. He spoke in a Nottinghamshire accent, enjoying the contrast of his voice with the bookish atmosphere of Hoggart's office.

AS: 'E's middle-class.

Price looked annoyed that Seaton had spoken on his behalf, but Hoggart was already questioning the young man further.

RH: Why do you say that?

AS: Because of 'is job. Maybe 'is family 'ave allus lived in tiny villages, but 'e's left that behind. Now 'e's just like any other o' yo' middle-class people.

WP: But I still *feel* working-class. I don't live that life now, but it's where I come from and what I am at heart.

AS: Listen, yo' can say what yo' like, but if yo' live in a big London 'ouse and work in a place like this, then yo' can forget callin' yourself working-class.

WP: So it doesn't matter where I came from?

AS: Not as much as where yo' are now.

RH: I noticed you included me in your idea of middle-class?

AS: Yes, o' course.

RH: Why?

Seaton laughed and Jimmy Porter smiled. When Seaton realised Hoggart wanted a serious answer, his laughter tailed off.

AS: Well, jus' look at yer! You're wearin' a suit, you're runnin' a 'seminar'. (*A note of sarcasm crept into his voice.*) We're sittin' in yer *office* for Christ's sake. O' course you're not working-class.

Porter nodded agreement.

RH: And what is working-class then, would you say?

AS: Easy; I am. I'm from Nottingham and I wok wi' my 'ands in a factory. I slave away for my boss, so at weekends I can go to 't pub, and 'ave some fun wi' the women. No suit, no office, no lady assistant to take notes for me. Just my 'ands, my liver and…one other thing I won't mention. I'm working-class.

He looked around triumphantly, but as he finished speaking Jimmy Porter, whose face had clouded over with anger during the speech, clenched his hand into a fist and smashed it hard on the table.

JP: For God's sake! Is that all you have to say about being working-class? Manual labour in a factory, getting drunk every night and chasing women? Is that all you do?

Seaton fixed Porter with a cold stare.

AS: No, I get into fights too.

JP: Unbelievable. You're claiming to be a paradigm of the working-classes, then playing up to every stereotype that exists! Why should anybody take the working-class seriously, when people like you turn it into a joke?

Anticipating further conflict, Hoggart intervened.

RH: What would you add to Arthur's picture then? Or change about it?

JP: It's far too simple-minded. I mean, for example, working-class people know about culture too; we appreciate books, music and art. Maybe not all of us (*he shot Seaton a scathing look*), but most people aren't oblivious to the fact that there's more to life than work, booze, fights and sex.

RH: And you're one of those working-class people who appreciate culture?

JP: Yes, and I went to university, but I'm still working-class.

AS: I said it's what yo' do *now* that matters.

JP: *Now*, I work on a sweet stall.

Seaton sniggered. Porter immediately became defensive.

JP: What? Isn't that a *real* working-class man's job?

AS: Not much it ain't! Fine, you're not middle-class even though yo' went to university. But as for workin' with yer hands, you're hardly working-class either!

Jimmy was deeply offended by this slight to his masculinity; he sat forward in his chair, his fists clenched, glowering at Seaton.

JP (*mockingly*): If you keep defining everything so narrowly, you'll end up alone, the only truly working-class man alive! It must be nice for you, sitting there so smug and sure of yourself, the paragon of brainless brawn!

AS: And it must be nice for yo', sittin' there spoutin' long words yo' think I can't understand! How can yo' look down on me *and* say we're from the same bloody class?

RH: Gentlemen, please, calm down. We're here in the spirit of healthy debate.

They both leaned back in their chairs, stiff and angry.

WP: Obviously you both have strong ideas about what makes a man working-class, but I'd like to know how you can dismiss Mr Hoggart and I so easily. I think it's far more complicated than you suggest.

RH: How so exactly?

WP: I've physically moved away from my roots, but I've never forgotten them. In fact, understanding where I come from and how it relates to who I am now, has majorly influenced my academic research. Currently I'm studying nineteenth century population movements into Wales, but behind the faceless statistics there's the weight of real people's lives. I can't help but see the individuals behind the numbers, and I can't help but equate my own experience with everything that's gone before me. I don't see how you can accuse me of having left my working-class past behind, when I feel the weight of it everywhere I go.

JP: That's all very well, but I don't think you can lay claim to the working-class tradition simply because you happened to be born into it.

RH: I think there's a much stronger connection than that.

JP: No, you're deluding yourselves. So you've dedicated your academic lives to understanding the influence of your background, but that implies you feel some gulf between you and your working-class histories. There's no direct connection for you, no certainty. I think to be working-class you *must* know, directly and simply, that that is what you are.

RH: And you have this 'direct connection'? You call yourself working-class because you *know* it, but because we think the connection's more complicated, we're excluded?

JP: Yes, you've moved away from your backgrounds, and you've tried to make sense of them in a middle-class context, which won't work. You sit in your middle-class offices, in middle-class universities and you write middle-class books about the problems of class and culture. By claiming to be working-class you're presuming to speak for all those people you think you represent. But how can you try to condense the entire working-class experience into some convenient academic format? How can you claim to speak for anybody but yourselves? You've forgotten what it is to be working-class. You only understand what it's like to have moved away from that class, because you didn't fit in enough in the first place to stay.

Hoggart was visibly upset by Porter's outburst. Never in his academic career had he come across somebody who would so vehemently defend his own sense of identity while ruthlessly condemning others'. He could not account for the young man's indiscriminate anger, but he wanted to know more about where it came from.

RH: You said you went to university and even now you're using the same terms, the same language, as the convention you condemn for being middle-class. Isn't that hypocritical? For all your protests, you're more like Mr Price and I – as educated working-class men – than you care to admit.

JP: Yes, I know the language of the middle-classes, 'and my profit on't is, I know how to curse'! But there's still a huge difference between you and I.

RH: And what's that?

JP: You've lost yourselves along the way. Something in your university experiences made you wonder about your backgrounds, about whether you're working-class or something else. And as soon as you stopped to think, rather than holding on to the one thing you should have known without a doubt, you were assimilated by the system. You're still part of it! You're

working in universities and you're grappling with the same questions. You're not working-class any more because you've lost the conviction that you are.

WP: So you think we've become middle-class by being 'assimilated'?

JP: No, I don't agree with Arthur, I don't think you've become middle-class. I know the middle-classes; relics of the Edwardian era, wistfully remembering how much warmer India is than England. You aren't those people, but secretly you wish you were. Why else would you leave your past behind?

RH: I haven't left my past behind! As Mr Price said earlier, I too feel the weight of my background all the time. I wake up every morning in what you'd call a middle-class home and go off to my university office, but I know that I didn't come from that world. I know that at the gritty, earthy bottom of my soul I'm a working-class man, who's trying to understand what that means from a different perspective.

JP: Listen to yourself! Trying to understand! Those aren't the words of a man who knows who he is!

RH: Then what makes you so different? Why can you sit there and ordain that I'm not working-class, but you are?

JP: The difference is that I *used* the middle-class academic world, took what I wanted from it and left again. I didn't let it keep me, I didn't let it get inside me and make me start wondering who I am. You both did. I held onto my working-class identity and left with it, embellished by education, by middle-class culture and refinements, but still intact.

WP: You're talking about education and culture as if they're objects! As if you marched into university, filled your pockets with the stuff and took it back to your sweet stall like Prometheus' fire. Culture isn't a commodity you can steal!

JP: Isn't it?

RH: You're also assuming university education is middle-class.

JP: Yes, it is. It's what turns working-class people into confused middle-class pretenders.

WP: No, I think university education is classless; it lets people think meta-socially. It takes you beyond the simple, deep connection you've mentioned, and makes you look at it differently, so you can understand it both inherently *and* intellectually.

JP: Or so you get caught up trying to understand it intellectually and lose the inherent connection you had. You wonder why you can't simply answer the question 'What is it to be working-class?' It's because it's impossible to answer intellectually. You either have to feel the answer in your bones, or not bother to ask in the first place.

RH: I'm sorry to say we've run out of time, which is very disappointing, because I feel there's so much more to be said. Clearly this is a very complex issue and it's striking how many differences of opinion there can be between only four men. Perhaps any attempt to categorise the experiences of being working-class or middle-class in general terms can't help

but fail. However, I hope that today has helped us all reach some understanding of the main issues involved with this question, but as for the answer, it seems we'll have to agree to disagree.

Part Two

When the seminar was over and the office had emptied, Hoggart rubbed his forehead, then stood up and stretched. He moved over to the corner of the office to speak to his assistant and check if the recording had worked.

"I want you to write up the transcript," he said, "and send it to me, then get started on the Newsletter article. Remember, they were all strong personalities today, so we want to portray them fairly. I think if you're faithful to the recording you should be able to write up a very interesting piece.

"Mind," he added, "don't embellish too much. This is an important and clearly quite sensitive issue, so when I send those men their copies I don't want them to feel they were misrepresented in any way."

Clare nodded, stood up, gathered together the papers and the recording device, and left Hoggart alone in his office. He wandered over to the window and looked out. There was a tree swaying outside and he found himself staring at it, as he lost himself in contemplation.

Self-Reflective Statement

In Part One, in order to discuss the major issues of the course, I put together some of the male protagonists from the core texts – Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* by Alan Sillitoe), Jimmy Porter (*Look Back In Anger*, John Osborne) and William Price (*Border Country*, Raymond Williams). I also included one of the main critics from the module, Richard Hoggart, giving me a broad spectrum of different working-class figures: Williams the successful academic; Price the struggling intellectual; Porter the educated anarchist and Seaton the factory worker.

I chose to write in a mixed form, in order to reflect the struggle with form in the genre of literature we have been studying. I contrasted the rigid, transcript-like structure with a narrative voice which had access to all of the characters' thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, I divided it into Part One and Part Two to reflect the similar dual structures of both *Border Country* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. I followed the conventions of the novels in which the characters appear in order to write their voices – therefore Arthur Seaton's accent, for example, is presented in the same way as Alan Sillitoe wrote it in *Saturday Night*.

Part Two demonstrates the irony that all of the characters, despite their intense dislike for others speaking on their behalf, are ultimately represented and characterised by a separate narrator. This irony is intensified by the fact that these 1950s male characters are characterised by a narrator with such a radically different perspective, as a 21st century woman.

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