



The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

**The individual and the collective in early twentieth century working-class
literature (Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, 1914,
and James Hanley's *Boy*, 1931)**

Amelie Jeeves

S/S 2026

'One of hundreds, one of thousands, perhaps millions' (Hanley 21)

Literary representations of the working class use the impossibility of individual escape as a device to advocate for collective social change. Both James Hanley's *Boy* and Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* convey genuine individual escape from socioeconomic oppression and poverty to be impossible without collective action or social upheaval. In *TRTP*, though Owen has mentally escaped the constraints of capitalism, it remains impossible for his material circumstances to change significantly, because the other workers refuse to listen to his enlightened ideas. *Boy* shows Arthur Fearon try to make a physical escape, but nothing affects the fact that he and everyone else in the novel find themselves trapped in their class. Poverty is presented as an impossible hurdle, and when Arthur attempts to make various escapes, he is punished for it, ultimately leading to a bleak death. This essay will explore how literary realism, fragmentation, and comparisons between the individual protagonist and broader social groups reveal the futility of the working-class individual's attempt to release themselves from a pervasive class structure.

Georg Lukács posits that effective social commentary in literature can only be made by evoking a full picture of class relations: realism can only be considered such if it considers "totality" (33). Tressell presents a broad cast of characters in the vein of this realism; class tensions are revealed, and the futility of individualism becomes apparent. The protagonist Owen exemplifies how even ideological escape from the "mind-forged manacles" (Blake 44) of capitalism does not constitute genuine 'escape' in such a divided society. Owen is presented as a frustrated socialist who consistently criticises the system that oppresses him: "money is the principal cause of poverty" (Tressell 154). Explanations like this, given often throughout the novel, allows Owen to become the political voice of Tressell in the work, as he compellingly (but unsuccessfully) tries to enlighten his fellow workers about the causes of their destitution. It is significant that Owen is allowed to express himself with formal English and correct grammar, a direct juxtaposition to the demotic language of the other workers,

littered with apostrophes and incorrect grammar as they proclaim that they “can’t talk like ‘him, ‘cause I ain’t got no ‘ead for it” (Tressell 175). Pamela Fox believes that this constitutes some of the novel’s “privileged version of proletarian epistemology” (77) which contributes to a “working-class shame”(64). Whilst Owen is placed on a pedestal of intellectualism compared to his peers, Tressell constructs Owen’s speeches as polemics in their own right, and their primary aim is to encourage the working-class reader to be invigorated by Owen’s argument and reject other accepted ideas. Through focussing on Owen as a symbol for socialist ideas, Tressell uses these dialogue choices to articulate the political point of the novel, and encourage readers to question their epistemology. The fact that Owen struggles to get his peers on side highlights the notion that collective social change is the only way out: though he has a different understanding of his oppression, he is more or less isolated in his beliefs. Ideology is irrelevant when Owen is unable to escape the class system which he inhabits.

Hanley’s *Boy* is fragmentary and opposes the notion of totality, favouring an individualistic approach to explore the working-class experience. Through the story of Arthur Fearon, Hanley creates a sense that the individual is entirely bound by class restrictions and poverty, no matter how far he physically travels. At the beginning of the novel, Arthur indicates that he wants a job requiring academic qualifications - “I wanted to study. I wanted to be a chemist, sir,” and it is understood that he is an intelligent child who has had more than one opportunity for a scholarship (19). However, his parents remove him from school so that he can earn a wage at the docks. Consequently, Hanley immediately establishes the notion that Arthur’s poverty prohibits any semblance of social mobility. This is furthered when Arthur is at school, learning about “Wat Tyler” (17), the leader of the 1341 peasant rebellion. Following the uprising, Richard II proclaimed that “you shall remain in bondage, not such as you have hitherto been subject to, but incomparably viler”(no pag). This allusion implies the

impossibility of agency for working class people like Arthur, as well as foreshadowing a danger should he defy what is expected of him. Though Arthur is used in order to tell a specific individual story, Hanley clearly establishes him as allegorical of his entire social class. When wondering whether to help him, Arthur's teacher decides that Arthur is "One of hundreds, one of thousands, perhaps millions" (21). However, by focussing the story only on Arthur specifically, the emotional resonance and sympathy of the reader is increased. Therefore, through rejecting Lukács' approach of "totality"(33), Hanley provides a compelling and emotive argument about the entrapping impact of poverty on the individual.

Both works portray the working class as an isolated and fragmented social group who ultimately submit to miserable conditions and fail to question their place in society. In *TRTP*, the other workers are "deluded foils to Owen's intellectualism"(Meade 149) – they fail to question narratives which they are fed about their place in society and the reasons for their poverty. The novel is mostly set in a house referred to throughout as "The Cave"(Tressell 15). This is an allusion to Plato's cave – an allegory in which the inhabitants of the cave do not believe that life exists outside of the cave, and deem the only inhabitant who has seen the outside mad. By invoking this direct parallel to the disbelief in Owen, Tressell establishes the naiveté and unwillingness of the proletariat, both as characters and readers, to think critically about their social positions. The first conversation of the novel immediately "anticipates the reader's similar delusions" (Fox 67) with timeless political scapegoating – "we're overrun with foreigners"; "new-fangled machinery"; "ther's too much of this 'ere eddication, nowadays" (Tressell 22). Later on in the novel, however, when Owen endeavours to use an "oblong"(248) to explain the division of money and labour, Tressell highlights that the men "were compelled to do a little thinking on their own account, and it was a process to which they were unaccustomed" because "in their infancy they had been taught to distrust their own intelligence" (278). Therefore, it is not that Tressell demonises his characters for their

ignorance, but in fact he creates an attack on the systemic denial of epistemological understanding which breeds the workers' myopia. Meade is correct in her assessment that the book is "less a commentary on the health of consciousness than an attempt to trigger the consciousness of the readership" (149). Tressell presents an explicit lack of collective action or feeling, and instead emphasises the tendency to scapegoat and remain fragmented, as deeply frustrating. The only way for the material situations of these characters to change, Tressell suggests, is through collective action, but a seeming inability to perceive new ideas or to think critically limits the extent to which this is feasible.

A feeling of entrapment pervades *Boy*, as all characters are confined to bitter hardships related to their social class. The absence of a socially conscious character (in the vein of Owen) makes this somewhat more implicit, but nonetheless there is a constant sense that the characters cannot escape from their class status. When Arthur runs away, he finds himself working at sea, referred to by one crew member as "slavery" (Hanley 166). Despite being physically elsewhere, the characters reproduce hierarchies within their isolated community – a sense of "displaced abjection" emerges (Stallybrass & White 53). This is evident as Arthur is subjected to sexual assaults from the men at sea (Hanley 76). Sexuality becomes an expression of physical power, and by leveraging this over Arthur, the characters' power takes a fragmented and individualised form. This notion of displaced abjection is perhaps most notable in the treatment of prostitutes in the novel. When Arthur returns to see a prostitute, he feels "a sense of power, of ownership, of mastery" (Hanley 141). After the assaults and oppressions which he has been relentlessly subjected to, Arthur here finds someone to assert dominance over, through paying her to do physical labour for him (rather than him being the one to do the physical labour). Therefore, Hanley constructs a divided working class who keep each other oppressed through displaced abjection and fragmentation of power, which means that no individual can break free.

The endings of the novels have differing tones, but each provides a message about the impossibility of individual ascent within a class system. In *TRTP*, Tressell finishes on a significantly more optimistic note than the majority of the book: positioning socialism as an inevitable future. “The Golden Light that will be diffused throughout all the happy world from the rays of the risen sun of socialism” (584). Young suggests that Tressell presents a view of the future in which the only viable socialism is “from above” (292): Tressell’s working class are themselves incapable of collective action. To some extent, this is convincing, considering the “loud shout of applause” (483) which Barrington receives in response to his “Great Oration” (459) is much more positive than any reception which Owen’s ideas have had throughout the novel. The revelation that Barrington is actually relatively wealthy at the end perhaps inadvertently explains why the other workers feel that they can listen to him: even though they are unaware, they are still inclined to listen to their social betters, as opposed to their “bloody windbag” (22) colleague. However, the disagreements actually communicate a wider point, that Barrington is *part of* the collective who could enact social change – “together, all of these characters bring something valuable and useful to the left, but separately their vision is partial and their reach is limited” (Meade 151). Through the cast of characters, therefore, Tressell does show that collective action is a necessity in order to break down class barriers: isolation is pointless, and the only way to achieve ‘escape’ is collectively.

Hanley’s ending presents a much more pessimistic view of the future, in Arthur’s death. This may be seen as another instance of displaced abjection, as he is killed by the captain, who “placed the greatcoat over the face of Fearon, and layed all his weight upon it” (Hanley 164). Additionally, however, it is significant that he is killed following his decision to leave the ship, when he goes alone to see a prostitute. In being killed as soon as he makes a choice, perhaps Hanley is communicating the curse on Arthur: that he, as an impoverished

character, is not allowed to make his own decisions or defy what is expected of him by his social superiors. Arthur's sexual awakening is equally relevant here, because it directly contributes to his downfall. When Arthur feels a "sense of...certain power, the sense of absolute escape from reality"(141), he is exhibited as a young man coming of age. When he assumes this position as a man, as opposed to the eponymous 'Boy', he contracts syphilis. This is a physical and metaphorical consequence of Arthur's actions – the moment he gains some power, his life ends. The book may be read as an incomplete bildungsroman, because, in coming of age, Arthur is immediately suppressed. Working class bildungsromans are an oxymoron, because impoverished young people are "without the right to dream"(Moretti x). Arthur is representative of emasculated working-class men, and his inability to take agency is allegorical of the financial, social and political powerlessness of this class. By focusing on an individual child's story, Hanley creates the sense that working class men cannot ascend beyond their allotted power.

Throughout both novels, individual stories are used to emphasise the loneliness of being working class, and the impossibility of escaping a deeply ingrained class system which fragments and isolates the working-class experience. *TRTP* shows an explicit commitment to collective social change, whilst *Boy* explores a more pessimistic picture of violence and displaced abjection which limits the possibility for reform. Across both novels, the resounding futility of the individual's attempts at escape appeal to the need for collectivist social change.

Works Cited

- Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009.
- Fox, Pamela. "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists and After: Epistemologies of Class, Legacies of Resistance" in *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890-1945*. Duke University Press, 1994.
- Hanley, James. *Boy: A Novel*. Open Road Media, 2015.
- Lukács, Georg. "Realism in the balance" in Adorno, Theodor W., et al., editors. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Verso, 2007. pp.28-60.
- Meade, Rosie. "More than 'just' a Novel: 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists' (1914)." *Saothar*, vol. 34, 2009, pp. 145–52.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World : The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. New edition. London: Verso, 2000. Print.
- Richard II, 1341. Accessed via Learn.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1986. Print.
- Tressell, Robert. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists / Robert Tressell [i.e. Tressall]*. [New edition; with an introduction by Alan Sillitoe], Reprinted., Panther, 1971.
- Young, James D. "Militancy, English Socialism and the Ragged Trousered Philanthropists." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1985, pp. 283-303.