

Social and Religious Transgressions in James Hanley's *The Closed Harbour*

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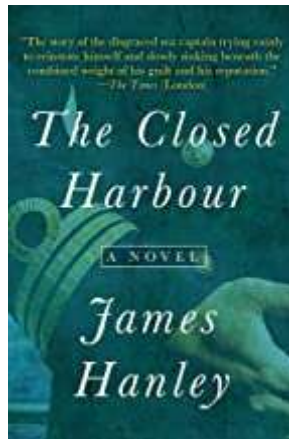
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Abstract

This paper examines James Hanley's very important post-war novel *The Closed Harbour* and it is published in 1952. In the beginning of the paper introduction about James Hanley and about his writing has given. James Hanley is one of the lesser known working class writers who has written extensively but got very little critics and readers' attention during his time. Hanley has written twenty six novels, short stories, plays and some general articles. In this research paper his first post-war novel *The Closed Harbour* has been chosen to explore more about his writing style and theme. The Literary Cultural Materialism theory has been used as an aid to explore more accurately. *The Closed Harbour* does challenge, alters, there is a dissent as well as transgression and these are common elements of Cultural Materialism. This theory helps in understanding Hanley's work in a broader perspective.

Keywords: James Hanley, *The Closed Harbour*, Transgression, merchant navy, Working Class, Cultural Materialism

This paper examines James Hanley's first post-war novel *The Closed Harbour* (1952) from the Cultural Materialist point of view. The research makes an attempt to know one of the lesser known British working class writers. James Hanley is a British working class sea writer and until recently many have not read about him and also not considered him seriously. The recent two research works on James Hanley attempted to bring him to limelight, John Fordham's PhD thesis *James Hanley Modernism and Working Class* and Michael Hallam's PhD *Avant-Garde Realism: James Hanley, Patrick Hamilton and The Lost Years of the 1940s*, these two well researched works give complete autobiographical details, and also show that challenge for any researcher is to chronicle about working class writer because it is a difficult task to find accurate biographical details. The working class writing is a subaltern kind of study and it needs extra care to comprehend this genre. The real facts are elusive, but these two great academic exercises have helped in understanding Hanley in a better perspective. The Cultural Materialism theory helps in connecting history and the text.

James Hanley wrote twenty six novels, short stories, plays and some stray articles. Hanley's beginning was very humble, and he worked in the ship as an ordinary dock worker. During the world war time he served in the Canadian war troop ship and later he did many odd jobs for his survival. From his formative days he was fond of reading and his favourite avocation writing and to do this he didn't have any formal education and only inspiration was his own blue colour work experience. Through his sheer grit and determination, he became the true working class writer of the twentieth century.

James Hanley is a multifaceted personality, whose intense experiences helped him instil elements of reality to his writing. His simple writing style shows that his writing is to reach the readers with his first-hand knowledge. Born in Dublin in an Irish family, he later moved to Liverpool and then to Wales. This triangular trajectory movement of location shaped his thoughts. He spent all his life as an Irish expatriate. Hanley took part in the two World Wars, and later went on to work in the merchant navy. Writing was a much-loved act of creative expression for him that brought little pecuniary profits. Yet, he received little recognition despite his voluminous creative production as against his contemporaries such as James Joyce, E.M. Forster and Dylan Thomas, who scaled different heights of popularity.

The paper will attempt to explore Hanley's post-war novel *The Closed Harbour* as forming a cohesive unity as opposed to his pre-war novels. Even though Hanley started his writing very early in his life, he had to strive hard to have his works published. His debut novel *Drift* was rejected seventeen times before it was published by William Faulkner in 1930. He had a lasting friendship with the contemporary writers like George Garrett, James Phelan, John Somerfield, Dave Marlowe and John Cowper Powys which helped him to keep his intellectual acumen in shape against all odds.

In 1930s Hanley was considered an emerging proletarian writer whose concerted efforts and concerns were focused primarily on Irish immigrant community of the industrial

England. However, both during pre-war and the post-war years, Hanley's writing radically contests the received notions of 'working class' writer and works. All his novels are arguably autobiographical in nature. Especially, *The Closed Harbour* is more autobiographical novel than any other novels.

During the wartime, Hanley made his own contribution through writings. He published three novels, essays and short stories during the World War II. Yet, his writing during this period is characterized by an absence of optimism and a well-defined orientation. Even though Hanley's writing in post-war years broke away from this self-imposed tradition of being hopelessly pessimistic in outlook, which was marked by the publication of the novel *No Directions*.

Hanley is generally remembered as a seafaring writer. Though in all his novels sea and lives of sailors appear as the dominant themes, his last eight novels or post-war novels have the themes of sea and sailors appearing in a present-absent pattern. In Hanley's writing sea is a metaphor for industrial displacement. For all his characters going to sea is a displaced pressure of working class experience. Hanley's world is an industrialized sea and the cities of Liverpool and Manchester are the very heart of a mechanized urban environment. The protagonists of his post-war novels are disillusioned and alienated. He captures the acute and wide-spread post war disillusionment caused by poverty, unemployment, psychological disorientation, and the total breakdown of social and religious institutions. Hanley's post-war writing changes dramatically and in his first post-war novel *The Closed Harbour* protagonist captain Marius is like Jim (Joseph Conrad's novel *Jim*) who breaks the unwritten code of the sea, having abandoned his ship and 'saved himself'.

For Hanley one of the primary means of negotiating his own position within the dominant post-war culture is through a close association with the tradition of sea-writing. Although Hanley's work centred on the sea, the dominant themes of his last eight novels range from poverty, unemployment, ignorance, frustration, impotency, madness, rural versus urban to the problem of post-war rehabilitation for sailors. These novels mark decisive break with his writing practice of the pre-war period.

Significantly, his writing mainly revolved around sea, dockyard, sailors, and other related things and in the post-war novels they are absent-present. Many critics associated James Hanley with proletarian ideology, but Hanley always stood apart and became the true working class prodigy than any ideology. James Hanley's writing career broadly divided into two, World War novels and the Post-War novels. In the research it has been found that his beginning novels are his immediate impressions on sea and ships and the working condition in the ship whereas his post-war novels are completely deviate from this and he diversify his subject with some modernist techniques. In addition to that his writing is always embedded with gentle satire and dissent. In fact, this major division has been made only for the connivance of this research. In general working class literature does not have any one

style, method, theory or particular period. For working class writers writing is spontaneous. Certainly, the constant recurring themes for working class writers are; layoff, unemployment, poverty, anti-hero, alcoholic, atheistic, rogue characters and protagonists are frequent brothel visitors. James Hanley is no exception for this he has used the same themes and portrayed his character with his humane writing.

The Closed Harbour is the first post-war novel set outside of England. It is set in Marseille, France and symbolically it is very powerful, and it indicates that it is a closed harbour physically, spiritually and socially for working class people. James Hanley's novels are always associated with sea and sea related concepts, but this novel is unique in its own way for many reasons and those things will be discussed in detail in this paper. The novel is mainly about mental trauma, hypocrisy of the capitalistic apparatus, social, religious and sexual transgressions.

This research has found that Hanley has infused enough violence in his novels but still for many critics Hanley has not portrayed real traumatic experiences like other working class writers like Alan Sillitoe and others. Since working class literature doesn't have any one particular theory to analyse and usually it is always associated with Marxism. To break this stereotype the new theory has been used that is the Cultural Materialism theory. Raymond Williams, a Welsh Marxist literary critic introduced Cultural Materialism in 1960. He described how his own work combined criticism of specific cultural texts with the material facts of history. In fact, this theory is very popular only after 1980s when Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore published a famous book *Political Shakespeare*. In this research paper Cultural Materialism has been used to understand James Hanley's novel from the historical material point. The Cultural Materialism theory mainly concerned about the relation between history and text and the essential question for any text is: does it challenge, alter, reject or endorse the prevailing ideology. Yes, of course Hanley's this novel does challenge the state apparatus and transgresses many accepted practices.

James Hanley was part of the BBC and its programmes and his several novels have been converted into plays. After the World Wars the British Government introduced several welfare programmes and The BBC is one among them. Though Hanley worked in the BBC for a long time he has retained his individuality through writing even though it was never lucrative in his lifetime.

Hanley's writing career has improved during post-war period because British government's liberal publishing policies and availability of papers. Even though he was part of British welfare programmes. He criticised the British society through his gentle irony, satire and lampoon.

The Closed Harbour is a psychological novel and it has only four main characters and third person narration. The novel begins with Eugene Marius searching for a new job and he

is walking alone in the street. The starting lines of the novels are in capital letters and absurd and it starts with “CERTAINLEY WAS NOTICEABLE ON THE AVENUE ...” (P.1) This beginning clearly gives the picture of alienation and dehumanisation of man in modern capitalistic society. The general perception is during post-war period Modernism completely disappeared, but it is not true in James Hanley’s writing and he has used modernist techniques in an effective way. Hanley has used three main elements in the novel: anti-hero, cult of violence and hedonistic lifestyle. These three main things lead to understand social and religious transgressions in the novel *The Closed Harbour*.

Captain Eugene Marius is an ex-sailor in the merchant ship, and he did not follow his father’s footsteps of taking up job in Navy and serving the country. This is his first social transgression. |While working in the merchant ship after shipwreck he is desperately searching for a job and he even ready to do subordinate job, but he is not able to find one due to his background. He lost his ship in questionable circumstances during the Second World War, drowning all on board including his nephew. As a result, he is ostracised not only by his family but by almost everyone in the port. Marius mother is dominating, sister is weak passive, suppressed and both they want to join the church without any spiritual orientation. Mrs Madeleine undermines her son’s self-esteem. Day by day captain Marius mental health deteriorates and at the end he lands up in a hospital. James Hanley gives more importance to individual problems and he used certain modernist techniques like absurdity, disjointed dialogue and third person narration to show the absurd kind of ambience in the post-war England.

James Hanley has tried his best in infusing violence in his stories and violence and he used it as a form of expression. Captain Eugene Marius is an anti-hero he transgresses all the expected roles in the family and in the society. At the outset novel begins with the Captain Eugene Marius desperate search for a job and repeatedly he fails to get it. He always feels that he is under surveillance. He senses somebody is watching him. “Even the red bricks knew Marius; the windows stared at him like eyes...”(P.3). Hanley’s portrayal of working class characters is very striking and always there is no hope in their life. Marius thinks that.

“Tomorrow will be tomorrow”, he thought”,
And they will still be there”, thinking of them
His mother, his sister, sitting so silently in the
Window, looking out, always looking out, at
What, the sea At everything, and perhaps nothing ... (P.10)

Hanley’s sea symbols and imageries are very powerful they encapsulate the hidden agendas in a nutshell. Captain Eugene Marius’ mother and sister two characters are strong women characters and they are always at home and looking at the sea through window. Captain Eugene Marius has personal and social problems and his relationship with his mother and sister is like a predator and the prey. Silence is glaring between Captain Marius and his

family. He indulges in smoking and drinking and always thinks that only he knows about him. “... I am what I am” he thought (P.19).

In fact, Hanley has deployed simple narrative techniques in this novel like ordinary dialogues, violence, uneven thoughts, vulgarity and silence. Captain Eugene is not just a social transgressor but also a religious transgressor he acts as an atheist and always feels he is dejected everywhere he strongly feels “I’m not wanted by anybody” (P.51). The capitalistic shipping industries are always opportunistic and during the World War time ships needed men but in the post-war men wanted ship. Hanley exposes the stark naked truths of the government policies and the lack of rehabilitation and healing centre for mentally traumatised sailors.

Eugene Marius’ father is dead in the First World War and revered at home. Mother and sister are dejected in life. On the contrary Marius never attends Sunday Mass and questions about the existence of God. Father Follet visits Eugene Marius’ house and, he opines that all of them are isolated. Mrs. Madeleine is not happy with her son’s return without the ship and others especially her grandson (her daughter’s son). She thinks her son’s action is a cowardice act compare to her husband, and she strongly feels that the first priority of the Captain is to save others until his last breath.

Eugene Marius transgressed saviour kind of image and his mother find something foul play in it. Eugene is not married but his mother sarcastically opines that “...he did not lack experience”. (P.35), this absurdity is glittering in the entire novel. Marius transgresses religiously and he never approves of his mother and sister joining the Church. *The Closed Harbour* symbolically is a spiritual claustrophobia. Marius is an anti-hero like other famous anti-heroes of English literature: Tom, Ahab or Macbeth. Marius is suspended sailor and never got a chance again to command another ship because distrust already surrounded him. The French government did not think of inquiry because France already under chaos and civil war were bothering them.

Though Captain Eugene Marius returned physically from the shipwreck but mentally he is not stable. Interestingly, the entire capitalistic shipping companies makes captain is the sole responsible for even technical failures and very hypocritically wants to see the captain in martyr image than castaway survivor. Captain Eugene Marius has been isolated completely and his interior monologues will shed some lights on his character this interior monologue shows his mindset.

“Marius talked to Marius
“You are a fool.
“You are a fool and at fifty that is
Unpardonable
You are on the ice cap

You are on the ice cap and
May stay there (P.69).

Marius needs are not just economic fulfilment but mainly compassion and forgiveness. But Marius mother is not in a mood to forgive even though his sister wants to forgive him. In fact, her sole intention is to know how her grandson died who has gone along with Marius. The family relationships are completely closed for him and to get that alternative love he regularly goes to the brothel house and there he loves a prostitute who does not want to marry him and who does not believe in the institution of marriage. He puts all efforts to arrange 300 francs a night, just to get some sympathy and compassion from her than just sexual gratification.

But in the entire story one person is anxious to help Marius is Aristide Labiche, a clerk in the Heroes Shipping Company, but he can't reach Marius. After some days Marius is admitted to the hospital and his mother visits him on doctor request but in vain, he can't recognise his own mother. At the end Captain Eugene Marius dies at the hospital.

In conclusion, Hanley's post-war writing is often retrospective and nostalgic; his quest for challenging the unconventional genres of writing places him among those writers who are preoccupied with the past yet tend to be anti-nostalgic in essence. The first twenty years of post-war British writing has been often identified with a general disillusionment about modernism and the resurgence of more traditional forms of realism in novel. The return of realism is borne out by the degree to which literary works of the period are concerned with the theme of social alienation. *The Closed Harbour* is an autobiographical novel.

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