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Affluence and Its Discontents: Working Class Literature of the 1960s and 1970s

Katy Shaw

Linked to the condition of labour, the term ‘working class’ nonetheless has as many social and cultural connotations as it does economic. Across the post-war decades, its meaning was in radical transition. While the improved social conditions, economic security and political consensus of the later 1950s and 1960s were of some material benefit to the British working classes, they fractured that sense of solidarity so long seen as fundamental to their identity. In the 1970s, further fragmentation was brought about by deindustrialization, rising unemployment and, towards the end of the decade and culminating in the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, the emergence of the New Right. Literary works—particularly social realist novels and ‘kitchen-sink’ drama (also known, for its sweaty realism, as ‘Armpit Theatre’)¹— and their counterparts in New Wave cinema reflected and shaped growing working-class suspicion and anger. These cultural expressions were accompanied in these decades by renewed interest in the working classes on the part of academics and middle-class writers. A leading venue of such interest was the *New Left Review*, launched in 1960. The *NLR* provided a vital forum for writers from the British New Left—a political movement with a reforming agenda that promoted gender equality, free speech, labour rights and a revisionist, socialist, humanist version of Marxism—and was initially edited by one of the founders of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall. Three years after the launch of the *NLR*, another New Left historian, E. P. Thomson, published his seminal text *The Making of the English Working Class*. A critical examination of the lived values of collectivism, solidarity and political radicalism amongst labouring people in 18th- and 19th-century Britain, this work emphasised the human element in social and economic history. Sensitivity to the real lives of the working classes, and to what these classes might mean for British culture, was therefore

¹ Edmund Johnston, *Armpit Theatre* (London: Lulu.com, 2012).

in the ascendant, even as the mood of the people of these classes changed from optimism to fear. The writers discussed here—Jeremy Sandford, Nell Dunn and Barry Hines—all picked up the mood-music.

The fictions and dramas of these three writers (and their treatment as films) are all examples of the social realist mode prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. Though its most immediate influences were the writings of Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thomson and other members of the New Left, social realism could trace its forebears to the various expressions of journalistic realism in the 1930s, which ranged from the British documentary movement to American New Reportage to Soviet social realism. Rejecting the romanticisation of the working classes and instead seeking actively to re-frame their cultural representation, the mode offered a potent combination of working-class subjects, naturalist treatment, Left-leaning political orientation and an industrial iconography. Though centred on events and situations that were often monotonous and mundane, social realist works of the 1960s and 1970s had impact because, like their New Reportage predecessors, they eschewed what the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács termed ‘description’—external observation that produced only ‘still lives’—in favour of ‘narration’, the mode of lived-through experience.² Readers and viewers would not only see the plight to which a working-class character was reduced: they would be taken through the causes of the situation so as to understand how it came about. In the texts discussed below, Sandford, Dunn and Hines expose the causes and consequences of the discontents arising, firstly from the new affluence and then from swingeing deindustrialization.

The Anxieties of Affluence

² Georg Lukács, ‘Narrate or Describe?’, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 110-48: pp. 130, 133.

Economically, the later 1950s could not have been more different to the decades of austerity and hardship that preceded them. As David Matless reflects, ‘war shook up the geography of England, unsettling people and their objects, transforming landscapes, moving things to where they weren’t before’.³ In 1957—five years into the so-called New Elizabethan era—the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan could argue that Britons had ‘never had it so good’.⁴ Affluence continued into the 1960s, which enjoyed public sector growth, near-full employment, high wages and improved standards of living. Members of the working classes, like those of other classes, now had additional money and extra time to spend on leisure activities and, across the space of a few years, a combination of cars, record players and labour-saving devices like fridges, washing-machines and electric irons revolutionised their homes. At the same time, fashion innovations, increased access to television and the relaxation of the censorship laws opened up the possibility of new kinds of self-expression, especially amongst the younger generation. Alongside a trend of experimentation in fashion, new forms of popular music—a range of genres in rock and pop—articulated working-class desires and were integral to the emergence of ideas about a more permissive society.⁵ These ideas were realized in legislative measures such as the Race Relations Act 1965, the Abortion Act 1967 and the Divorce Act 1969 (which established irretrievable differences as a ground for divorce), all passed by Harold Wilson’s first government. Yet the benefit of these developments was experienced only to varying degrees by members of the British working classes, and, in the literary works discussed below, the affluence of the 1960s becomes a site of tension as material aspiration threatens traditional working-class values of community and cohesion.

³ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 173. On 1950s affluence, see further David Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951-1957: Tales of a New Jerusalem* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3728000/3728225.stm, accessed 6 October 2015.

⁵ See further David Simonelli, *Working Class Heroes: Rock Music and British Society in the 1960s and 1970s* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

Jeremy Sandford's play *Cathy Come Home* (1966), broadcast on 16 November 1966 on the BBC and directed by Ken Loach, was watched by 12 million people—a quarter of the British population.⁶ It is famous, notorious even, for offering a searing indictment of homelessness, alongside the spectacle of working-class characters struggling against other challenges including poverty, unemployment and abortion.⁷ At the opening of the play, the eponymous Cathy and her partner Reg appear to enjoy many trappings of the new affluence that defined their decade. Residing in a 'penthouse apartment' (34), the pair have a comfortable lifestyle, and make regular trips to the shops where they are described as 'enjoying choice, enjoying affluence' (35). Yet Sandford also hints that they are living beyond their means; in Cathy's words, as the couple tot up their income and outgoings, 'there's no point in having such a posh place if we can't afford it' (34). The spectre of unemployment soon looms large over the already financially-stretched couple, first for Cathy, who comes home to tell Reg that 'they're laying us all off at Christmas. They've got these new machines, they won't need us no more' (35), and later to Reg who struggles to find permanent employment again. When Cathy falls pregnant, the couple remains confident that in an age of credit and general prosperity they will be able to buy their own home, yet it soon becomes clear that they lack the necessary deposit and Cathy is left to muse that 'I thought that it was easy for ordinary people to own their own houses now' (37). In reality, the only flats they can afford to rent are those 'where you can sit on the toilet and be cooking the dinner on the kitchen stove at the same time' (44), a remark that reveals not only cramped conditions but a marked reduction of agency. Following their move to the private rental sector, the couple are challenged by the limitations of affordability, as well as landlords who

⁶ Libby Brooks, 'Cathy Come Home Still Rings True Today', *The Guardian Online* (4 September 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/04/cathy-come-home-rings-true>, accessed 18 April 2017.

⁷ Jeremy Sandford, *Cathy Come Home* [1966] (London: Marion Boyars, 1976). Page numbers are given in the text.

refuse to accept children, forcing them from a flat to a ‘slum house’ that is ‘overcrowded’ (67), and finally to a ‘caravan’ (74).

With each move, Cathy feels increasingly compromised in the face of a seemingly indifferent society. Her questions to Reg—‘Are you sure we’re safe there? You sure we can’t be moved from here? They won’t come and get us?’ (74)—acquire an increasingly desperate tone as they accumulate. Temporarily, Cathy is placated, but ironically only until they are finally moved on even from the caravans and evicted as private tenants. With a fading hope that ‘there must be somewhere for us’ (91), Reg moves his family between homes, then rented rooms, and finally shared and disused sites. When he appeals to the local authority, he is pointedly reminded by a government official that ‘the average family on our waiting list has to wait years for a house’ (99). Finally they have no choice but to rent a room in a ‘derelict house’ where they shelter until a ‘bulldozer starts to knock down a wall’ and they are forced to sleep in an ‘abandoned car’ (91).

Cathy eventually ends up in Cumbermere Lodge, a home for women with children who do not have a permanent place of residence. Here she meets other women (or ‘inmates’ as they jokingly term one another) for whom the Welfare State has proved simply inadequate. One woman reports that, despite having a council home, she was evicted when her husband left her. This is policy, she reports: ‘if you’re an abandoned woman they turn you out they do [...] They say it’s to stop men leaving their wives. But it didn’t work in this case’ (111). Nor does it work in Cathy’s case. Reg leaves, ostensibly to find work and a home in which they can all settle. He is urged on by Cathy—‘Go Reg. Why don’t you? You need a job, love’ (131)—but both know he won’t return. As Sandford notes, ‘husbands, ashamed, humiliated, and unable to cope with the situation, would have abandoned their families anyway’.⁸ This was ‘no slur on the husbands’ but ‘a slur on the situation which society had provided for

⁸ Jeremy Sandford, ‘Introduction’ (adapted from a tape-recorded interview with Alan Rosenthal), *Cathy Come Home*, 7-14: p. 9.

them'.⁹ Another woman whom Cathy meets was evicted from her rented house when it was 'needed by the Works Department for a road widening scheme' (111). The silent victims of wider state abandonment or asset acquisition, these women are left destitute, powerless and reliant on charity. The play concludes with an intensely emotional scene in which Cathy's two remaining children (one already having been sent to live with Reg's reluctant mother) are taken into care and Cathy is left completely alone. As the stage notes accompanying the final scene note, 'the break-up of one family by our society is complete' (138).

Cathy Come Home was based on investigative journalism conducted by its author into accommodation problems facing young unemployed working-class families. Sandford, a graduate of Eton and Oxford, became a campaigner for the homeless following a move from Chelsea to a working-class suburb of Battersea during the late 1950s. In his Introduction to the 1976 version of his play, Sandford reflected that, as part of the writing process, he 'worked from a very large number of newspaper clippings that [he] had accumulated through the years, transcripts of tape recordings, actual tape recordings, notes of people [he] had met and places [he] had been'.¹⁰ He noted that in 1966 there were 12,411 people in hostels for the homeless, in 1969 there were 18,849, and that the present total was 32,292.¹¹ The impact of *Cathy Come Home* was ground-breaking: the drama was discussed in parliament during debates about welfare and housing and was later cited as one of the informing influences for the formation of British homelessness charity Shelter (founded on 1 December 1966). Making visible the working classes in order to highlight social issues and raise awareness, Sandford's dramatic documentary fiction reminded audiences that the 1960s were not a period of increased social and economic choice for all. As she slips from the new affluence that embraces her contemporaries, Cathy is left exposed and vulnerable, at the mercy of a social welfare system that is revealed as failing. The cracks in working-class solidarity and

⁹ Sandford, 'Introduction', p. 9.

¹⁰ Sandford, 'Introduction', p. 11.

¹¹ Jeremy Sandford, 'The Story Brought Up To Date', *Cathy Come Home*, 140-1: p. 140

familial closeness are also exposed, most notably in Reg's mum's disinclination to look after either 'Grandad' or Cathy's children ('Leave Mylene with me? You must be out of your bleeding mind' (113)).

In her 1967 novel *Poor Cow* (also turned into a film, in the same year, by Ken Loach), Nell Dunn develops many of Sandford's social concerns to tell another narrative of working-class experience during the 1960s. Joy, the ironically-named protagonist, is a 'daydreamer' (3), hungry for the improved lifestyle available to the working classes but suspicious of a new desire amongst them for consumer goods.¹² Dunn writes:

Above her head an ad, with lots of golden girls in bathing suits read COME ALIVE.
YOU'RE IN THE PEPSI GENERATION!

'Fuck that', she said. (2)

In this explicit rejection of the Americanisation of mass culture associated with the new affluence, Joy offers important testimony. For her, membership of the 'Pepsi generation' is not the life of a golden girl in a bathing suit but existence in a society which is structured to limit women's freedoms and to direct their behaviour. Having a child appears to crystallise many of these concerns for Joy, and whilst at home with her baby (which she has been left to raise alone at the age of just 22), she reflects that:

I can't bear the thought of all these women in the flats around me—all doing the same things—mopping down the lino, washing their husband's shirts, changing their babies, doing the shopping, it's all gone bent on me—the everyday life—the sight of a shopping basket almost turns my guts. If only I had a car—I'd be able to get away—drive off and find somewhere where there weren't no bleeding women with prams—where there weren't no television to sit in front of night after night, and no bleeding husband to clamp down on every little whim that might come my way. (112)

¹² Nell Dunn, *Poor Cow* [1976] (London: Bloomsbury Classics, 1996). Page numbers are given in the text.

In this passage, Joy scorns the domestic duties, spaces and routines which bar working-class women from being active social, political and economic agents, and also critiques the soporific effect of mass popular entertainment. At the same time, though, it is notable that she would like to have a car—a literal vehicle of escape from domestic and maternal duties, marital frustration and the deadening nightly TV. Consumer culture *can* provide a way-out, this implies, but car ownership is, for Joy and other working-class women, likely to remain a day-dream.

Instead, *Poor Cow* details an inexorable deterioration in Joy's situation, following her attempts to cope alone and her struggles with unemployment. Through a combination of first and third person narration, Dunn enables readers to feel close to Joy, but also maintains a detached perspective on the wider social issues her situation highlights. With no stable income to rely on, Joy complains that:

it's as if I'm hanging on all the time—just clinging on telling meself—life's all right—it's a great experience living—you really are living and then I think, Poor Cow, who are you taking on? Let's face it, it's just escaping from one misery to another. Who really enjoys life? Kids when you get down to it—kids are the only ones who really get a kick out of being alive. (43)

With Joy 'overcome with desolation' (7), Dunn illuminates the isolation and despair of the protagonist as she lies awake 'trying to fathom out the meaning of her existence' (18). The self-named 'poor cow' has been reduced to an animalistic state of being in which life consists of no more than 'hanging on'. The phrase suggests physical precariousness and temporal deferment, but there is no sense that the outcome of 'hanging on' will be a better future.

More specifically, there is no hope of better—acceptable—accommodation. As in *Cathy Come Home*, the complicated and often interrelated problems contributing to female homelessness in the 1960s are critically examined. Charting the experiences of a vulnerable

working-class woman, Dunn depicts Joy moving between temporary shelters in an attempt to hold her family together and, in the process, reveals the psychological impact of her protagonist's abandonment by central government services. With little consideration for the causes of her homelessness, or the implications of fracturing the family, the authorities leave her without choice, power or control, as she is forced to surrender her children and fend for herself on the streets of an indifferent Britain. Only the vestiges of working class solidarity remain, in the bleak hospitality offered by Auntie Emm, a former sex-worker, and in the genuine love that Joy and Dave sustain for each other while he is in prison. Alone with her baby at the conclusion of the text, Joy is presented as yet another woman who has fallen through the gaps in society.

In her introduction to the 1988 Virago edition of the novel, Margaret Drabble notes the tension in the 'myth of escape and liberation' represented by Joy's plight.¹³ In *Poor Cow* Dunn importantly profiled a desire in advertisers to turn the working classes into a market for their products and, in doing so, verified working-class people's status and power as consumers. But she simultaneously offered a critical warning regarding the dangers inherent in the new affluence—the breaking-up of working-class communities and the rise of a new discontent.

Poor Cow's focus on female working-class experience during this period was closely followed by an exploration of the challenges faced by male members of these classes in Barry Hines's 1968 novel *A Kestrel For A Knave* (filmed by Ken Loach as *Kes* in 1969). Drawing on his own experience growing up in the mining town of Hoyland, near Barnsley, Hines sets his narrative in South Yorkshire and mobilises both the marginalised spaces of working-class communities and the regional dialects of working-class people as he traces the cruelly

¹³ Margaret Drabble, 'Introduction', Nell Dunn, *Poor Cow* (London: Virago, 1988), ix-xviii: p. xi.

thwarted aspirations of the young boy protagonist Billy Caspar. Profiling individuals who are trapped by their class circumstances, the novel illuminates the extent to which Billy is *pinioned*—to use a term from the governing imagery of falconry—by economic deprivation, lack of opportunity and a dysfunctional family, though not by his own imagination. In a structure set over the course of a single day and designed to echo the rhythms of working life, readers witness the limitations imposed on Billy as he struggles, like Joy and Cathy, against an apparently indifferent British society.

Specific social and economic conditions are represented in the novel's literary landscape. Billy's house is located on a vast, run-down council estate with a bad reputation. Neighbours openly comment that 'they're all alike off that estate. They'll take your breath if you're not careful' (24).¹⁴ The novel describes how 'along all the Roads, Streets, Avenues, Lanes and Crescents of the estate, the houses were of the same design: semi-detached, one block, four front windows to a block' (21). This working-class estate is situated in the shadow of 'the pit chimney and the pit-head winding gear showing above the rooftops' (41). But on his paper-round, Billy is allowed access to pastorally-named Firs Hill, a recent housing estate of farmhouse conversions and detached new builds and a prime example of the new affluence. The reader sees this other world through Billy's eyes as he notes 'at the side of the house, a grey Bentley was parked before an open garage' (58). As an outsider looking in, Billy is conscious of the highly visible consumer goods on display in the new estate that mark its difference and divide him from its world. While he watches the daily routine of middle-class families as they leave for work, readers are drawn to the sharp contrast with his own parents at home, and his own lack of economic and cultural resources. For Hines' novel is at pains to highlight that, far from this being a period of plentiful employment, job options for the working classes are severely limited. Even as a paper-boy, Billy is told 'there's a

¹⁴ Barry Hines, *A Kestrel For A Knave* (London: Penguin, 1968). Page numbers are given in the text.

waiting list a mile long for your job' (14) and, when asked what he would like to do for a living by the Youth Employment Advisor, answers only 'I shan't have much choice shall I? I shall have to take what they've got' (103). When Billy ventures that he might aspire to an office job, the Advisor pointedly reminds him that his future is likely to lie down the local pit.

Throughout the novel, Kes, the kestrel Billy has adopted and is training, figures a life of freedom and naturalness beyond deprived material circumstances—an avian avatar, though more beautiful and more glorious, for the kind of life that might be dreamed to go on in Firs Hill. Only one adult—Mr. Farthing, the English teacher—engages with Billy's love and self-taught skills of falconry. The boy instructs the teacher, revealing his easy familiarity with technical terms such as 'jess' and 'swivel' (80). Watching the bird in flight, Mr Farthing is moved to remark, 'when it flies there's something about it that makes you feel strange' (145). Billy concurs: 'I know what you mean, Sir, you mean everything seems to go dead quiet' (145). The 'quiet' is a moment of relief from the violence and noise of Billy's day-to-day life. But his flights of imagination and confidence are grounded, as are his aspirations, with the bird's death at the hands of his vindictive half-brother Jud. Like Sandford and Dunn, Hines allows Billy (and the reader) the most agonising of counter-narratives or might-have-beens. A single, interested teacher will make no difference; Billy is doomed, as Jud and all the others of his class are doomed, to an existence impoverished in all its aspects, by structurally inequitable economic circumstances that quash the stirrings of love.

Contesting assumptions about the 1960s as a period of prosperity and opportunity for all, the work of Sandford, Dunn and Hines turns the narrative spotlight on 'the lives of ordinary people in matters that are relevant to their times'.¹⁵ Each writer chooses social realism as the mode for his or her storytelling, and in so doing effectively conveys working-class characters who struggle with the implications of wider changes experienced during the

¹⁵ Quoted in M. K. Macmurrough-Kavanagh, 'The BBC and the Birth of the "Wednesday Play", 1962-66: Institutional Containment versus Agitational Contemporaneity', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 17.3 (1977), 367-381: p. 374.

1960s. Although each writer creates characters surrounded by the new affluence, their texts suggest that more money and material possessions do not ultimately provide a better life for the working classes, but rather foster division, envy and discontent. What is also notable is the dysfunctional nature of family life in these texts: traditional support structures have been fatally undermined.

Deindustrialisation and the working-class man

Christopher Booker argues that the 1970s should be considered ‘the most important decade of the twentieth century’ as a result of the social, political and cultural changes that occurred during these years.¹⁶ While the 1960s were popularly regarded as a time of hope and progress in the UK—a conception which, as shown above, was intrinsically flawed—the 1970s emerged in comparison as a rather depressing period of anti-climax. If the members of the post-war generation of the 1960s in the UK were wealthier, enjoyed a more liberal society and were broadly more confident than their parents, many remained frustrated by a continued lack of opportunity. This generation wanted more control over their lives, identities and labour rights, and by 1969 this had led to the beginnings of new decade of industrial unrest. In his overview of the second half of the twentieth century, Andy Beckett asserts that ‘the worst of times came between the election of Edward Heath in 1970, and the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979’, and Nick Hubble, John McLeod and Philip Tew concur that the ‘1970s in Britain were marked by controversy, a period associated by many with decline in general and industrial unrest in particular’.¹⁷

Politically, the 1970s saw major changes in the UK government as Edward Heath came to power with the Conservative Party in 1970 at time when the British economy was at

¹⁶ Christopher Booker, *The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade* (London: Allen Lane, 1980), p. 7.

¹⁷ Andy Beckett, *When The Lights Went Out: What Really Happened To Britain In The Seventies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.1; Nick Hubble, John McLeod and Philip Tew, ‘Introduction: Britain in the 1970s – Controversies and Cultures’, *The 1970s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Nick Hubble, John McLeod and Philip Tew (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1-15: p. 1.

a low point. Productivity was down, while union activity and inflation were both on the rise. The 1971 Industrial Relations Act introduced a new and unpopular system of compulsory registration for unions, while the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, and the 1978-9 Winter of Discontent meant that the decade quickly became defined by industrial-based economic problems. Along with the curtailing of trade union powers and an emerging economic recession, unrest among workers—and therefore among the working classes—grew more frequent. Through a series of industrial crises, Britain was tested economically, socially and politically. Social historian Alwyn Turner admits that this was 'a decade when it sometimes appeared that the nation was on the verge of a nervous breakdown',¹⁸ while Andy Beckett reflects that something 'profound and unsettling' happened to Britain in the 1970s and 'Britons have been living with the consequences ever since'.¹⁹

While for many the 1970s is historically defined by the rise of second wave feminism, it also marked a significant period of transformation in working-class models of masculinity. Employment had always been a central resource for the construction of these models. Productive labour, bringing home a family wage, solidarity in working relationships and physical capability defined male working-class identities. Masculine networks often extended outwards into the community and social settings such as pubs, working men's clubs and local sporting teams. However, with the onset of deindustrialisation and the rise in the number of women entering the workforce, these former sources of social power for working-class men were undermined during the 1970s.

Barry Hines examined these tensions and traumas through the microcosm of a Yorkshire coal-mining community in *The Price of Coal*, written as a two-part BBC *Play for Today* television drama in 1977 and published in novel form in 1979.²⁰ Dave Rolinson argues

¹⁸ Alwyn Turner, *Crisis, What Crisis? Britain In The 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2013), p. 14.

¹⁹ Beckett, *When The Lights Went Out*, p. 1.

²⁰ References are to the novel version: Barry Hines, *The Price Of Coal* (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1982). Page numbers are given in the text.

that *The Price Of Coal* is ‘key to any understanding of the working class during this decade because it draws attention to miners’ political importance in the 1970s’, a significance that would come to sharper focus in the decade that followed.²¹ Hines’s text examines a working-class community under pressure from both within and without. Charting a variety of responses within this community and drawing on traditions of militancy, his work uses an exemplary single site to symbolise more widespread problems across British industry and its associated working-class communities.

The Price of Coal comprises two plays (novellas in the 1979 version)—both featuring the same cast of characters—that examine the seeds of the social and industrial unrest that came to define the decade. The first, ‘Meet The People’, offers a darkly funny insight into the working-class community around the mine as preparations are made for a visit by Prince Charles. The discontent of the miners about the royal visit is represented through the ironic use of capital letters in reference to royalty: ‘One of the men asked if He was looking for a job. Another replied that He could have his’ (8). The majuscules, which give the imminent Charles a messianic aura he can never live up to, also lend an apocalyptic air to the novella/play, reflecting the broiling industrial tensions.

Critiquing the Royal Family as ‘figureheads of a society that’s still based on class and inherited wealth and privilege’ (48), the character of Syd, a miner, is used by Hines to draw attention to more fundamental problems with maintenance and investment in the industry that combine to create unrest. Syd’s criticism centres around this ‘whole business of tarting the pit up’ (8). As John Kirk argues, ‘Work is the central organising feature [...] not only its dangers, but its capacity to engender collective solidarities and a more radical value-system and structure of feeling.’²² If Charles’s impending visit unifies the miners in opposition, it

²¹ Dave Rolinson, ‘The Price of Coal’ [2013], *BFI Screenonline*, <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/557217/>> accessed 12 August 2015.

²² John Kirk, *Twentieth-Century Writing and the British Working-Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 92.

also engenders fractious feelings of low self-worth and resentment. Syd believes that ‘He’ ‘ought to see it as it is’ (9) and considers the royal visit to be a political act designed to ‘take their minds off the real issues’ (44). Consequently, Syd protests at the timing of the ‘facelift’, highlighting a ‘shifting mood’ (9) within the community and suggesting wider discontent in his claim that ‘if all this fuss is worth making, it’s worth making for us. It’s us who work here and live here. It’s us who see it every day, and it should be our needs that come first, not His’ (45). Not all his comrades in the union agree. Over a game of snooker at the Working Men’s Club, Alf Meakin, the union Branch Secretary, insists ‘You know as well as I do that that money’s not just been spent for this Visit’ (45). This is a difference of opinion in a context in which male working-class solidarity, focused on the fortunes of Yorkshire County Cricket Club, is generally robust, and in which familial structures are still strong. Nonetheless, the disagreement is symptomatic of the divisiveness of management policy. In this regards, the conversation over snooker is a prefiguration of the far greater intra-union hostilities that would emerge in the Miners’ Strike of 1984-5.²³

The threat in Hines’s dyad to working-class solidarity is not so much consumer affluence as chronic industrial under-investment. The second novella/play, ‘Back To Reality’, deals with the consequences of a maintenance that is purely cosmetic. A month after Prince Charles’s visit, there is a serious pit accident. Drawing critical attention to wider issues of disrepair and dangerous working conditions that continued to proliferate in the industry during the 1970s, as well as to the heroism of the miners involved, the second play bears similarities to the historical pit disaster at Houghton Main Colliery in 1975, of which Energy Minister Tony Benn said, nearly forty years later, ‘it might remind people, as it reminded me, that there is still a very high price in human life to be paid, for the coal we get

²³ For a discussion of the impact of the 1984-5 Miners’ Strike on British culture and writing, see Nick Bentley ‘Working-Class Writing and the Decline of Class Consciousness’, *Accelerated Times; British Literature in Transition 1980-2000*, ed. Berthold Schoene and Eileen Pollard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

in this country'.²⁴ The consequences of industrial accidents are economic, as families are left without male breadwinners but also—as the play powerfully makes plain—deeply personal. In increasing suspense, the reader/viewer waits with Syd's wife and son to discover what has happened to him and Hines needs only to describe the reaction of Ronnie King's wife to hearing of his fate to convey what his loss will mean to her: 'she collapsed as cleanly as if she had been knocked out' (156). Though the other families will rally round, Ronnie's death, like Syd's injuries, figures the blow that has been struck at the traditional mining community.

Conclusion

If the 1960s appear from some angles as an optimistic period of prosperity and near-full employment, from others the impact of the new affluence of the post-war period looks less rosy. But efforts to critique the effects of the 'shiny barbarism'²⁵ of mass culture, produced 'a golden age of working class literature' and 'a new mood of confidence amongst working-class writers' who profiled social and economic issues that would come to define the decade.²⁶ The militancy of the following decade, the 1970s, functioned as an ever clearer signal that the interests of workers and those of business were parting company. This created not only ideological tensions and industrial conflicts, but also a decline in the number and nature of working-class roles. As Syd remarks in *The Price of Coal*:

Do you know that a lad leaving school today will have to learn three new trades in the course of his working life? It's not like it used to be you know, when a lad could train to be a bricky, and still be laying bricks when he hung his trowel up at sixty-five. (19)

Confronted with the rise of consumer affluence and industrial militancy, the reconfiguration of the British working classes was accompanied by the concurrent decline of the trade union movement, and the fracture or dissolution of lived experiences of community once inherent to

²⁴ Tony Benn, 'The Human Price Paid For Nation's Coal', *Yorkshire Post*, 18 March 2014, p. 17.

²⁵ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* [1957] (London: Transaction Publishers), p. 157.

²⁶ Ian Haywood, *Working Class Fiction: Writers and Their Work* (London: Northcote House, 1996), p. 94.

traditional working-class conceptions of identity and belonging. In the works discussed by Sandford, Dunn and Hines, we see what this means in human terms: refusals to look after family members, a brother's act of gratuitous cruelty, arguments between union comrades. To be sure, these are not romanticised treatments of the working-classes, and to the list could be added misogyny, racism and violence. But vestiges of those traditional conceptions of working-class togetherness still shine through: parental love, sibling affection, loyalty expressed in badly written letters. These moments are no romanticised caricatures, either. Rather, they reveal what is at risk in the encroaching tide of expanding consumer capitalism and deindustrialisation. Working-class solidarity and—more simply—working-class closeness are in existential crisis.