

The Class Game

Mary Casey



Apple Inc.

1st Edition

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Context

Pre-Reading Questions:

Which social class would you describe yourself as? Why?

What does it mean to be “working class” or to be “middle class?”

Is ‘social class’ still important in the 21st century (hint - think about words like ‘chav’)? Does it affect the way that you are treated by others, or the way that you treat other people?

How might ideas about social class lead to **conflict**?

Want to know more about social class?

There are countless resources on social class available on line.

'The Class Ceiling' - BBC radio broadcast about social class in today's Britain: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0147f3r>

'The Great British Class Survey' - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/labuk/experiments/class/>. Take a survey and find out more about social class in Britain (NB - to take the survey you will need to register for a free BBC ID).

A journalist writes about his own experience of social class growing up in Salford - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/apr/14/general-election-social-class-salford>

Mary Casey and 'Voices'



Not much is known about Mary Casey, except that she was a housewife from Liverpool. Casey was a contributor to a poetry magazine called “Voices,” which existed from 1972-1984. “The Class Game,” published in 1979, was one of four poems of Casey’s that appeared in the magazine.

“Voices” published poems by working class writers. These authors were not professional poets and had no literary reputation; they were ordinary people who wrote largely about their everyday experiences.

Some critics were rather snobby about “Voices,” and even the academic who had started the magazine, Ben Ainsley, wrote in the introduction that “I can make no great claims for these pieces, except that they are, it seems to me, varied, interesting, freshly written, and in most cases the work of men and women taking up a pen late in life; with some qualms, though with real curiosity as to how it will turn out.” This implies that he had some doubts about the ‘literary value’ of the work.

Why might it be significant that most of the literary elite did not see the work of working class poets as interesting or important?

Want to know more?

Although “Voices” ended in 1984, there is a website dedicated to it, which has lots of additional information about the magazine and its contributors.

<http://www.mancvoices.co.uk/>

The Class Game

How can you tell what class I'm from?

I can talk posh like some,

With an 'Olly in me mouth,

Down me nose, wear an 'at not a scarf,

With me second hand clothes.

← **wince** = cringe, look pained.

So why do you always **wince** when you hear

Me say "Tara to me Ma" instead of "Bye Mummy dear"?

How can you tell what class I'm from?

'Cos we live in a **corpy**, not like some,

In a pretty little semi, out **Wirral** way,

And commute into Liverpool by train each day.

Or did I drop my unemployment card,

Sitting on your patio (we have a yard)?

How can you tell what class I'm from?

Have I a label on me head, and another on me bum?

Or is it because my hands are stained with **toil**,

Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and oil?

Don't I crook me little finger when I drink me tea,

Say toilet instead of bog when I want to pee?

Why do you care what class I'm from?

Does it stick in your **gullet**, like a sour plum?

Well mate! A cleaner is me mother,

A **docker** is me brother,

Bread pudding is wet nelly,

And me stomach is me belly

And I'm proud of the class that I come from.

Mary Casey

← **corpy** = old Liverpoolian term for council house.

← **Wirral** - a suburb of Liverpool that has a reputation of being "posh."

← **toil** = work

← **gullet** = windpipe

← **docker** = somebody who works in a shipyard.

Initial Activity

Look at the annotated version of the poem below and answer the questions at the bottom.

THE CLASS GAME

How can you tell what class I'm from?

I can talk posh like some,
With an 'Olly in me mouth,
Down me nose, wear an 'at not a scarf,
With me second hand clothes.

So why do you always wince when you hear

Me say "Tara to me Ma" instead of "Bye Mummy dear"?

How can you tell what class I'm from?

'Cos we live in a corpy, not like some,
In a pretty little semi, out Wirral way,
And commute into Liverpool by train each day.

Or did I drop my unemployment card,
Sitting on your patio (we have a yard)?

How can you tell what class I'm from?

Have I a label on me head, and another on me bum?

Or is it because my hands are stained with toil,

Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and oil?

Don't I crook me little finger when I drink me tea,

Say toilet instead of bog when I want to pee?

Why do you care what class I'm from?

Does it stick in your gullet, like a sour plum?

Well mate! A cleaner is me mother,

A docker is me brother,

Bread pudding is wet nelly,

And me stomach is me belly

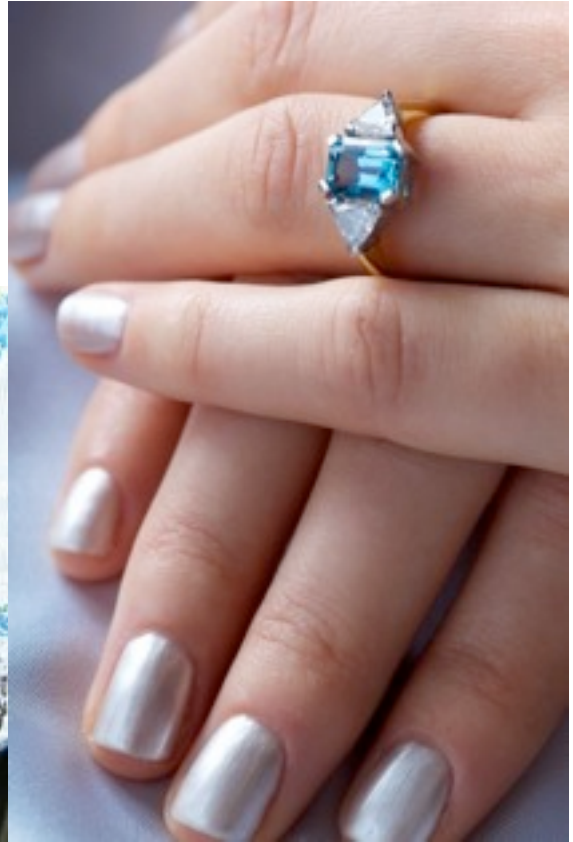
And I'm proud of the class that I come from.

What do the words / phrases highlighted in orange represent?

What do the words / phrases highlighted in blue represent?

How do you think Mary Casey feels about being working class?





“Or is it because my hands are stained with toil?
Instead of soft lily white from perfume and oil?”



“How can you tell what class I'm from?
'Cos we live in a corpy, not like some,
In a pretty little semi, out Wirral way
And travel into Liverpool by train each day?”

Structure

-Meaning

-Imagery (similes, metaphors, personification)

-Language

-Effect on the reader



Meaning

“Meaning” is a good place to start when thinking about a poem, as here you can discuss the principal theme(s) of the poem and why you think the poet has written it.

Meaning - Key points:

- In this poem, Casey is challenging the reader’s class stereotypes. She asks the reader “how do you know what class I’m from?” and argues that she is labeled by others in a certain way (“do I have a label on me head, and another on me bum?”)
- The title “The Class Game” could refer to the way people play a ‘guessing game’ about people depending on things such as where they live (“a corpy” or “a pretty little semi”) or how they speak (“ta ra to me ma” or “Bye Mummy dear”).
- At the end of the poem, Casey asserts that although people judge her and are prejudiced against her (e.g. they “wince” when she talks) she is very proud to be working class (“And I’m proud of the class I come from.”)

Exploration - Meaning

What do you think is Casey’s key idea in this poem?

How does she feel about the way she is judged by others?

What emotions do you think she is feeling about her class background?

Structure

Structure refers to the way a poem is set out and organised. Here, you write about things like rhyme scheme, length, repetition and the flow of ideas throughout the poem.

Structure - Key Points

- The poem is a **monologue**. A monologue is a speech read aloud by a single character.
- In general, the **rhyme scheme** is AABB (**rhyming couplets**):

How can you tell what class I'm **from?** - A
Have I a label on me head, and another on me **bum?** - A
Or is it because my hands are stained with **toil,** - B
Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and **oil?** - B

However, sometimes the rhymes don't always rhyme properly (e.g. "from" and "bum" is only a half-rhyme). In the first few lines of the poem the AA BB structure breaks down, so the rhyme is not always consistent.

- There are no stanzas, but **repetition** of the poem's key question "How can you tell what class I'm from?" breaks the poem up into sections.
- There is a use of **enjambment** (this is when a single phrase is broken across two lines):

So why do you always wince *when you hear*
Me say "Tara to me Ma" instead of "Bye Mummy dear"?

- There is a question / answer structure. She asks the question to her imaginary audience (“how can you tell what class I’m from?”) and then suggests an answer to her own question (e.g. “Or is it because....”).
- The last few lines are slightly different - instead of challenging her audience as to why they think of her as working class, Casey asks them why it matters (“Why do you care what class I’m from?”). She then says that she is proud to be working class:

“Well mate! A cleaner is me mother,
A docker is me brother,
Bread pudding is wet nelly,
And me stomach is me belly
And I'm proud of the class that I come from.”

Exploration - Structure

Why does a monologue structure work for this particular poem?

Why do you think Casey might have chosen a very ‘simple’ rhyme scheme of AA BB? How could this fit in with the ideas of the poem?

Why does the rhyme scheme not always “work” perfectly? What could this tell us about Casey’s mood?

What is the effect of the use of enjambment in the lines:

“So why do you always wince when you hear

Me say "Tara to me ma" instead of "Bye Mummy dear?"

Why do you think Casey repeats her key question of "How can you tell what class I'm from?"

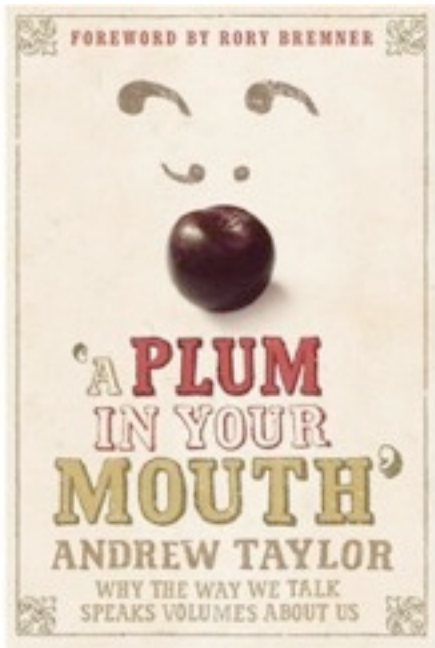
Why are there so many rhetorical questions used in the poem? Who do you think Casey is addressing (e.g. working class people / middle class people?)

Imagery

This is where you look at techniques such as similes, metaphors and personification. What pictures has the poet tried to create in your head?

Imagery - Key Points

- The imagery in this poem focuses on **comparing** working-class and middle-class lifestyles (look back at the blue and the orange). NB - although there are not many examples of metaphors, similes or personification, we can talk about imagery in this poem in a broader sense of the pictures Casey tries to create.
- One key image is the one of the hands - “my hands are stained with toil.” Toil means work. This is contrasted with hands that are “soft lily white from perfume and oil.”
- There is a simile towards the end of the poem - “does it stick in your gullet **like** a sour plum?” This simile is effectively asking whether they can’t accept her; whether she and the way she speaks is something they are unable to swallow, something they choke on and have to spit out.



Why do you care what class I'm from?
Does it stick in your gullet like a sour plum?"

Exploration - Imagery

How does Casey use imagery to contrast between working class and middle class lifestyles?

Do you think the line “my hands are stained with toil” accurately describes how her hands look, or do you think it is metaphorical?

Why do you think Casey chooses to use the simile “stick in your gullet like a sour plum?” What is the significance of the word “plum?”

Language

This is where you comment on the language the poet uses. What choices has he/she made, and why?

Key Points - Language

- Casey uses very colloquial (informal) language (e.g. “bog,” “mate,” “bum”).
- She frequently uses Liverpudlian dialect words (e.g. “corpy,” “wet nelly”).
- She uses non-standard grammatical forms that are typical of Liverpudlian dialect (e.g. “at,” “tara to me ma,” “me tea”).
- When she’s describing “posh” people, she self-consciously uses standard English forms (e.g. “Bye Mummy dear,” “a pretty little semi,” “soft lily white with perfume and oil”). This is a ‘parody’ of “posh” speech - she is effectively making fun of them for the way they speak and for their own habits.

Exploration - Language

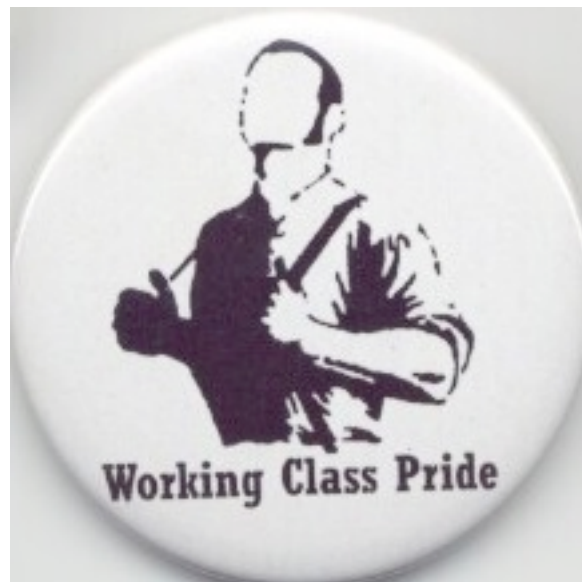
Why does Casey use informal language and Liverpudlian dialect words in this poem? How might this relate to her poem's message?

Why does Casey parody (make fun of) "posh speech?"

Effect on the reader

Key Points - effect on the reader

- Casey wants her readers to question the judgments people make about others on the basis of class.
- Her tone is angry and humorous - she wants readers to laugh as they recognise the stereotypes, but also to think.
- She wants other working class people to feel proud of their origins, but the poem seems to be addressed to middle class readers, and she wants them to stop being snobbish and judgmental.



Exploration - effect on the reader

Who do you think Casey is addressing in the poem?

What is your own personal response to the poem? Did you like it? Why or why not?

Sample Exam Question Part A

3. a) “Explore how the writer presents her ideas about class conflict in “The Class Game.”

Use examples of the language from the poem to support your answer. (15 marks).

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.

Comparison

My suggested poem to compare this to would be “Half Caste” by John Agard, as this is also about identity and prejudice. You could also choose Daljit Nagra’s “Parade’s End” if you preferred.

Look at the ePub on “Half Caste.” Fill in the following table looking at how Casey and Agard each present their ideas on their own identity.

	<i>Mary Casey - “The Class Game”</i>	<i>John Agard - “Half Caste.”</i>
Meaning		
Structure		
Imagery		
Language		
Effect		

Sample Exam Question - Part B

Answer EITHER 3(b)i OR 3(b)ii

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of “The Class Game” and “Half Caste” present their views about tensions due to class and race. (15 marks)

3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of “The Class Game” and one other poem of your choice from the Clashes and Collisions collection present their views about conflict in any setting. (15 marks)

Use examples from the language of **both** poems to support your answer.

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.

