**‘Horrific punishments and their effects’**

Horrific punishments have an effect on people, and these effects can be mental, physical and emotional and have the ability to scar someone for the remainder of their life. The two texts I have chosen are ‘Dear Mr Cairney’ by Graeme Lay and ‘Singing My Sister Down’ by Margo Lanagan. These texts both fit into the theme of horrific punishments and the effects that these can have. They both show how damaging punishments can be, and the long-lasting effects. The texts show the importance of a just and fair punishment and how those who abuse their right to punish can risk losing respect.

‘Dear Mr Cairney’ is a short story written in letter form. The letter is written by ‘A Past Pupil’ who sees in the newspaper that an old teacher of his has been appointed as the new Head Master of the local school. The past pupil writes about the punishments that he was given while he was taught by Mr Cairney. The boy is deliberately publically shamed, with the teacher calling him only by his surname and by making him stand up in class for the smallest of infractions. “You asked me what my name was and when I told you you called me by my surname and told me to keep standing for quarter of an hour and I went very red and the others in the class laughed and for the first time since I started school, I almost wished I wasn’t there.” This shows the power and influence that teachers can have on students that they teach. For the past pupil, the sense of shame and humiliation was damaging for him, so much so that he wished he was not there. “You made me feel sort of ashamed and I didn’t know why.” The shame that was one result of the punishment had not done the past pupil any good, because while he was aware of the sense of shame, he was unsure about why he felt like that. In my opinion, for a punishment to be an effective correction and learning tool, the one being punished needs to understand where they went wrong. Without this, the punishment is ineffective as there is nothing to learn from. As school is compulsory till a certain age, it needs to be somewhere where students feel valued and cared for.

While punishment is necessary to teach correct behaviour, it needs to be fair and just. The past pupil also writes of the punishment he was given by Mr Cairney for being out of his seat when he had completed his work. In the short story, the past pupil is a young boy at the time of the punishment. He was strapped three times for being out of his seat. When he does not cry and show weakness, he is forced to clean out a dirty drain with his cut hand and then when he still does not break, he is strapped another three times. This event showed that Mr Cairney was more interested in making the boy break, rather than correcting his behaviour. In my opinion the punishment was undeserved, but it also went far too far and Mr Cairney abused his position of authority and used a small infraction to horrifically punish a young boy. “Because I was so small, you thought I ought to be crying. And I was. But only on the inside. Through the dizziness and the sickness and the pain I knew I must not show that I was.” This shows that another effect on the boy was that he learnt at a young age that people would do anything to ‘win.’ In this instance, the past pupil understood that by not crying and showing weakness, no matter what Mr Cairney did to him he would not win. I believe that this made the boy a stronger person, even though it is a horrible lesson to learn. In society, governments who do not act fairly and justly, and who abuse their right to rule, often find that they lose the respect and trust of those they are ruling. Governments have power, but that power must be used fairly if they want to continue to rule. When power and punishments are abused, it can lead to the population rising up against an unfair leader. History shows that this can lead to civil wars.

The short story is very detailed, down to the colour of the stitches on the strap that Mr Cairney used. The boy writes that “I was surprised at how clearly I still remembered you, even though it has been nearly twenty years since you taught me.” This suggests that the punishment had a lasting emotional effect on him, as he remembered it in great detail two decades later. He also ends his letter by informing Mr Cairney that his son would be attending the local school, and if he “so much as touch one hair on his head, I will come along to your school and smash every bone in your face.” The past pupil feels justified in voicing the extreme threat because of the way he was punished and shamed by Mr Cairney in the past, and he feels a parental need to protect his son from the same kind of vicious treatment. The author seems to be suggesting that punishments which are extreme compared to the crime committed can scar those who receive them, and perhaps make them behave in ways that they normally would not.

Horrific punishments and their effects are also seen in ‘Singing My Sister Down’ by Margo Lanagan. In the short story, Ik is convicted of murdering her husband with an axe. She is sentenced to a public execution; this involves slowing sinking in tar while the village and her family watch. This punishment seems fairer than ‘Dear Mr Cairney’ because Ik herself admits that she did commit the crime, while the past pupil was largely innocent. Like in ‘Dear Mr Cairney,’ the punishments are both physical and mental. However, one punishment is corporal punishment while the other is capital punishment. Ik and the past pupil are both publically shamed, but Ik’s family are also shamed by association. “We went after her, Ik’s family, which was like us being punished too, everyone watching us walk out to the girl who was our shame.” This suggests that punishments can lead to a sense of shame, even when the punishment is not deserved or is unfair as Ik’s family have done nothing wrong, and yet they are linked to her through blood. Human nature often means that we blame others for someone else’s actions, or we think that they are somehow tainted now by association.

In both texts, the punishment has an effect on a small, vulnerable young boy. Ik’s young brother, the narrator, is deeply traumatised by watching the punishment inflicted on his sister. He remains strong, just as the past pupil did, until the punishment is over but then he falls apart. “Everything went slippery in my mind.” He states that “[Mumma] carried me like Jappity’s wife used to carry Jappity’s idiot son, and I felt just like that boy, as if the thoughts that were all right for everyone else weren’t coming now, and never would come, to me.” He is unable to function on his own after witnessing the slow and torturous death of his sister. He has effectively been punished as well, and there is the suggestion that he may not recover from the experience. Watching those we love being punished in such a way can be just as hard, if not more so, than receiving the punishment ourselves. Even though the boy knew that Ik had committed the crime, he was still made to watch her execution. He felt a sense of obligation to be there and make her last moments as pleasant as possible for her. I can understand this, and there are still many places in the world where capital punishment is legal and frequent. Family members often have to witness the execution of someone they love, despite what they may or may not have done. The author of ‘Singing My Sister Down’ seems to be suggesting that capital punishment does not just punish the offender, and perhaps it is unnecessarily cruel for families or loved ones to have to witness the event. The short story also showed that family is family, and even though Ikky had shamed and destroyed her family with her actions, in the end they do what they can to comfort and support her. Even when execution is the punishment for a horrific crime, forgiveness is a strong emotion and it is still possible. This showed a more positive side to human nature.

However, this text also shows the extent humans will go to in order to mete out justice, and the pleasure that people can take in watching others suffer a horrific punishment. The people in the village gather on the banks of the tar pit to watch Ikky sink. “They set up a big, spooky oolooling and stamping on the banks, to see Mumma grieve.” This shows a horrible side to humans, and a sick fascination with watching and taking joy in someone else’s punishment and pain. In society today, the public executions being committed by ISIS are horrific and inhumane. This group seems to operate on their own sense of ‘morals.’ The recent execution of the Jordanian pilot is just one example of how they seem to enjoy watching others suffer their chosen punishment. The pilot was set alight and his death was videoed. This had an effect on those who saw this on the news, and led to a general public outcry of the barbaric treatment of the pilot.

Both Mumma from ‘Singing My Sister Down,’ and the past pupil felt the need to protect their family from the punishment they had either witnessed or experienced. The effect of the punishment was that both of these characters issue warnings. The past pupil threatens Mr Cairney, while Mumma warns her son against making choices that will result in the same punishment as Ik. “All you can do is watch out who you go loving. Make sure it’s not someone who’ll rouse that killing-anger in you, if you’ve got that rage, if you’re like our Ik.” Both parents want to protect their children from horrific punishment, and both texts show that parents will do what they can to save their children pain and humiliation. Mumma also accepts the punishment. “This is what they do, what they have to do.” She accepts the punishment because it is something that has been done before for the same crime and therefore she understands and her sense of justice is not offended. There is no sense of anger at the Chief for his decision to execute Ikky, while the past pupil felt immense anger towards Mr Cairney. This suggests that if punishment is deserved it is a little easier to accept. It highlights the importance of fair and just punishments, and punishments that ‘fit the crime.’ When punishments seem horrific, extreme and over-the-top, then they are hard to accept.