

Question 3

The novel's central theme is arguably the question of belonging and/or owning, a question deeply entangled in both myth and history. Read up on Robyn Hode/Robin Hood, on the history of "Enclosure" and on the "Right to Buy"-scheme (Wikipedia will do) and discuss the novel's engagement with these (hi)stories.

- (Robin Hood)
 - Robin Hood is famous for being known as an outlaw who steals from the rich to give to the poor. This story can be connected to John, the dad in the story. Even the name "John" can be associated with "little John" who is one of Robin Hood's chief enforcers. Juxtaposed against Mr. Price, John sees himself as one who owns nothing. He says, "I won't work for any man ever again. My body is my own. It is all I own" (122). Mr. Price, on the other hand, "detest[s] that which he could not control" (124) and ultimately own. Similarly, John cares for the people in the community. Daniel as narrator says, "Daddy did take care of people. He spent his mornings in the villages around or at the farms of tenant farmers. He had many stories like this" (99). But Mr. Price only cares about power and money.

After John is threatened by Mr. Price, he rallies the community together to stand up to the abusive landlords. John is stronger than any other "muscle" and can therefore protect the townspeople during this protest. In essence, he "steals" from the rich by initiating the rent boycott and gives to the poor by protecting them with the one thing he has, his body.

The one dilemma with this perspective is that John does end up taking the people's money from Ewert.

- (Enclosure) // *"Mr. Price does nothing with these woods. He doendt know the trees. He doendt work them. He doendt know the birds and animals that live here. Yet there is a piece of paper that says this land belongs to him."* (121)
 - Enclosure refers to the different ways The Commons are appropriated and possibly even privatized. Often, this occurs through the physical barring off of public land. In *Elmet*, the area where John, Cathy, and Daniel move is technically privatized land that belongs to Mr. Price, meaning they don't actually have the legal right to live on it. Of course, Mr. Price doesn't even take care of the land.

Notably, some countries have responded to the privatization and enclosing of land by creating “right to roam” laws. For instance, in Scotland the Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2003 “codified into Scots law the ancient tradition of the right to universal access to the land in Scotland” (Wikipedia). Of course, even if that rule applied in the novel, it wouldn’t allow John to legally move onto land technically owned by Mr. Price.

- (*“Right to Buy”-scheme*) // *Key Passage*: “A woman in a fleece and jersey tracksuit came forward. Her long, dirty-blond hair was held in a low ponytail at the nape of her neck. She gripped a lit cigarette between the ring and middle finger of her left hand and told Ewart about the man who owned her bungalow. ‘At least when I paid rent to council, I felt I could get things fixed. It were a slow process, always, but someone would come eventually and see to cooker, or whatever. I knew who to go to. I knew there were some kind of, what’s word, process, always, no matter how tricky. I gave me money to council and I kept place nicely and in return I got a decent place to live. Now it’s a private landlord and he doesn’t give two stuffs. I don’t have a fridge any more. The wire went last year and it hasn’t been cold since. It’s just another cupboard. [...] The landlord doesn’t want there to provide a service, as he saw it, or to offer out in return for money I paid him. I were paying money for land. For right to live on land” (169-170).
 - With the “Right to Buy” -scheme, UK tenants renting in council houses (public housing) are given the opportunity to buy said house at prices below the average open-market housing price. The idea is to help these renters have more affordable rent and, if they choose/are able to, a more realistic chance for house ownership. Yet this scheme has been abused – once sold, a council house can easily come into the ownership of private landlords. These landlords can then privately rent the once affordable houses at higher prices.

In the above passage, a woman discusses some of the issues that arise from this scheme. When living in a council house, she expected maintenance requests to be filled in return for her rent. And, even though it might take some time, her expectations were fulfilled. But with the private landlords, the same requests aren’t fulfilled (even if contractually obligated). This ultimately revolves around the question of land ownership: with council housing, she paid for renting *the house*; with private landlords, they position themselves as renting the *land* (which they individually own) and are not so worried about the tenants’ experiences in the actual house.