

Harper Valley P.T.A.

Jeannie C. Riley's 1968 recording of Tom T. Hall's country song was a huge hit in the United States and Britain, selling over 6 million singles. The song inspired a film, released in 1978, and a TV series that started in 1981. Live performances of the song can be downloaded from YouTube. The song has also been recorded by Margie Singleton, Dolly Parton, Mary Jane Hooper, Billy Ray Cyrus and Loretta Lynn. The lyrics are taken from the CD *Ultimate Country Vol. 3*, Demon Music Group 2004.



I want to tell you all a story 'bout a Harper Valley widowed wife
Who had a teenage daughter who attended Harper Valley Junior High
Well her daughter came home one afternoon and didn't even stop to play
She said, "Mom, I got a note here from the Harper Valley P.T.A."

The note said, "Mrs. Johnson, you're wearing your dresses way too high
It's reported you've been drinking and a-runnin' round with men and going wild
And we don't believe you to be bring up your little girl this way."
It was signed by the secretary, Harper Valley P.T.A.

Well, it happened that the P.T.A. was gonna meet that very afternoon
They were sure surprised when Mrs. Johnson wore her mini-skirt into the room
And as she walked up to the blackboard, I still recall the words she had to say
She said, "I'd like to address this meeting of the Harper Valley P.T.A"

Well, there's Bobby Taylor sittin' there and seven times he's asked me for a date
 Mrs. Taylor sure seems to use a lot of ice when he's away
 And Mr. Baker, can you tell us why your secretary had to leave this town?
 And shouldn't widow Jones be told to keep her window shades all pulled completely down?

Well, Mr. Harper couldn't be here 'cause he stayed too long at Kelly's Bar again
 And if you smell Shirley Thompson's breath, you find she's had a little nip of gin
 Then you have the nerve to tell me you think that as a mother I'm not fit
 Well, this is just a little Peyton Place and you're all Harper Valley hypocrites

No I wouldn't put you on because it really did, it happened just this way
 The day my Mama socked it to the Harper Valley P.T.A.
 The day my Mama socked it to the Harper Valley P.T.A.

Original words and music by Tom T. Hall

Vocabulary

8 secretary (n.): here the member of a club or organisation who takes notes in meetings and writes official letters - **16 shade** (n.): AmE for BrE blind - **20 hypocrite** (n.): s.o. who pretends to have certain beliefs or opinions that they do not really have - **21 to put s.o. on** (v.): to tell s.o. a lie - **22 to sock it to s.o.** (v.): (infml.) to tell s.o. s.th. in a direct and forceful way

Explanations

Title/ Harper Valley: a fictional place in the US - **Title/ P.T.A.:** also PTA; see p. 8 - **20 Peyton Place:** a novel written in 1956 by the American writer Grace Metalious, later made into a film. It takes place in a small town in New England and its main themes are hypocrisy, social injustice and class privilege. The name has come to stand for any place that has sordid secrets, betrayals and emotional upsets.

AWARENESS

- 1 Collect and discuss songs which deal with school and education. Put them into categories such as "anti-school", "pro-school", "teachers", "school subjects", "school life" and characterise how they deal with these topics.

COMPREHENSION

- 2 Who is the narrator of the song?
- 3 Why did the P.T.A. write to Mrs Johnson?
- 4 Why did Mrs Johnson's daughter not "even stop to play" when she came home from school?

ANALYSIS

- 5 What idea of womanhood does Mrs Johnson represent?
- 6 What aspects of American life does the Harper Valley P.T.A. represent?
- 7 Analyse the narrative point of view of the song and discuss what effect it has.

OPINION

- 8 Write an essay in which you give your opinion on the role that P.T.A.s and their counterparts in Germany should and should not have in influencing teachers, schools and education.

PROJECT

- 9 Take some of the songs you discussed in the **AWARENESS** task and write about the view of education they embody.