‘My upbringing among so-called “inarticulate” people has given me a passion for language that communicates directly and immediately’. How successfully does Harrison convey this “passion for language” in the School of Eloquence?

Read the Question
When you approach any essay question you must spend time working out what you are being asked to do. You need to identify and explore the KEY WORDS in the question.
The question here has several elements:
- you need to consider the effects of Harrison’s UPBRINGING on his own poetry
- does Harrison present his family as INARTICULATE? What is implied by his use of the words ‘so-called’?
- you need to consider whether Harrison conveys his ‘PASSION FOR LANGUAGE’ in The School of Eloquence
- you need to consider whether Harrison ‘communicates DIRECTLY and IMMEDIATELY’ in his own poetry

Planning
You must spend time planning before you start writing – a good plan will ensure you have a well-structured essay which answers the question. Planning is NOT wasting time. It is useful to brainstorm your ideas but don’t be tempted to put them in your essay in the order in which they came to you. ORDER YOUR IDEAS into an appropriate sequence.

Answering the Question
Remember there is no right answer for a literature question but you must present your argument convincingly supporting it with appropriate evidence. You should refer to the Assessment Criteria for literature coursework in your handbook. The length of this essay should be approximately 1500 words.

Introduction
Outline your aims for the essay and introduce your view or argument in response to the question.

Harrison’s Background
- Harrison was born in Yorkshire in 1937. His father, a miner then a bakery worker, died in 1980. His mother, a housewife, died in 1976.
- At the age of eleven, Harrison won a scholarship to Leeds Grammar School and went on to study Classics at Leeds University. How does Harrison present the effects of his education in The School of Eloquence?
- Harrison often presents his father and other relatives as struggling with communication and failing to understand his interest in literature. For example, we are introduced to his two uncles Joe, a stammerer and Harry who was mute in ‘Heredity’ which serves as an epigraph to The School of Eloquence. Is Harrison suggesting his own oral and literary skills have developed because of or in spite of his linguistic inheritance? These two uncles reappear later in The School of Eloquence while his father, whose speaking ‘was like conjurors..pulling bright silk hankies, scarves, a flag up out of their innards’ (‘Fire-eater’) and ‘nivver ‘ad much time for a good read ’ (‘A Good Read’) is the subject of many of the poems in the sequence. Consider the frequency of imagery related to mouths, spitting, stuttering and chewing throughout The School of Eloquence.
- Even though Harrison has moved far away from his background, and not just geographically, it is still extremely important to him and his poetry. This is evident in the language he uses and his feelings of affection, bitterness and guilt.
Does Harrison Communicate Directly and Immediately?
- Consider Harrison’s choice of subject material
- Discuss Harrison’s use of form. Does the sonnet form give Harrison’s poetry immediacy? How?
- Explore Harrison’s use of language. He deliberately includes the direct speech of working class people including his father. He uses colloquial language which often includes swear words. Harrison’s work is meant to be spoken aloud – different voices and accents are evident. In ‘Illuminations’ you need to pronounce ‘us’ like the ‘uz’ of ‘Them & [uz]’ so that it rhymes with buzz. How does this position us as readers? Do you think Harrison intends to speak for or to the working class? Is he successful?
- Harrison’s language is often blunt, gritty and occasionally could be seen as aggressively masculine? Think about his use of alliteration ‘dropped dead’ ‘capless, conscious of the cold patch’ (‘An Old Score’) and monosyllabic words ‘back flayed, grey, mad, dumb’ (‘National Trust’).

Does Harrison Convey His Passion for Language in The School of Eloquence?
- Consider what is reflected in Harrison’s choice of the sonnet form with its metrical rhythm and strict rhyming scheme.
- His passion for the language of Keats, Wordsworth, Ibsen et al is evident. Kafka and King Lear have caused him to get ‘unbearably excited’ (‘A Good Read’) but so is his passion for the language of those who have traditionally been denied a voice (‘National Trust’, ‘On Not Being Milton’).
- He also demonstrates his interest in languages no longer spoken – ancient Greek and Cornish – and emphasises the importance of preserving language in order to preserve cultural and individual identity (‘National Trust’, ‘Them & [uz]’). He is fascinated by the roots of contemporary English (‘Painkillers’) and revels in puns and other forms of word play.
- Consider how Harrison describes his own voice in ‘Fire-eater’: ‘Theirs are the tongues of fire I’m forced to swallow/ then bring back knotted, one continuous string/ igniting long-pent silences, and going back/ to Adam fumbling with creation’s names’

Conclusion
You should have developed convincing arguments throughout your essay and now it’s time to summarise them. How does the quote used in the question relate to the poems you have read and written about? Does Harrison convey his ‘passion for language’ in The School of Eloquence? You may not think there is a simple answer to this question so feel free to identify problems and conflicts – Harrison does this in his own work. Remember also that you’re not advertising Harrison, you need to remain critical.