

Rebel and Social Climber: John Braine's Room at the Top

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Abstract:

Britain, as every different Nation-State was also afflicted with class disparities or biases from the beginning of its socio-political existence. The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century exacerbated these disparities. The working, lower, upper-middle, and upper class were four main classes of British society. The war's disruptions had an effect of rearranging of existing social status and inter-class relationships. The post war environment was engulfed in rage and disillusionment. In 1956, majority of Europe was in a state of upheaval. Young people's rage was caused by a variety of factors connected to the prevailing conditions. There was a proliferation of regional universities that provided schooling to working-class people, resulting in white collar unemployment. Tone of protest was escalating by the second half of the decade. *Room at the Top*, a work by John Braine published in 1957 was set in the post war period and pessimistic about the so called professed values of the Labour Government in Britain. "The Top" was attained by the protagonist not through socialism, but through human self promotion. The protagonist of this novel, Joe Lampton, does not defeat the upper class; however, he also becomes part of them. He doesn't sponsor any wars, but he does sponsor professional achievement based on good looks. As a result, the rage seems to be a ruse to achieve his goals. Indeed, he is one of those who express their rage and rebellion by barging into the very class they despise. This paper basically focuses on the rebelliousness and social climbing nature of the protagonist in the novel *Room at the Top* and everyone is aware that the young generations are losing the earth now.

Keywords: revolution, society, status, socialism

1. Introduction

John Braine, author, born in Bradford, passed most of early life at Thackley, village which was part of Bradford with a mindset of an individualistic individual, attended St. Bede's Grammar School. Following many struggles for work he finally attains the position of a library assistant at Bingley, a small town near his village. This made it possible to further this career with a period of war service in the Royal Navy at Morpeth and Darton near Bransley. Eventually success of his work *Room at the Top* (1957) made him devote most of his time to Literature. The author spent time in London in pursuit of new heights in writing and contributing to others new works. His major works, *Life at the Top* is sequel to *Room at the Top*. His other works when published were not successful. His next work *The Vodi* got

produced in 1959. Other notable works are, *The Crying Game*, *The Jealous God* and *Stay with me Till Morning*.

Though other works didn't have major success *Life at the Top* and *Room at the Top* were appreciated and acclaimed. In these works he gives a glimpse of the sensibilities of the young generation of the nineteen fifties. These writings reflect their rebellion against class prejudices and the sacrifice of ethical behavior to achieve goals. Though they reflect anger and resentment against the class inequalities but they still compromise and collude with the same class for social betterment. After climbing up the social ladder through doubtful means the question still arises is are they happy now that they have arrived. After triumph in attaining *Room at the Top* they lose their footing on the ground. Similarly John's central character Joe in this work is very conscious about his class and lowly background which makes him angry. Joe the Protagonist, born in Dufton where he works as low level clerk, in Treasury Department; then as a Sergeant Observer, Bavaria. He leaves Dufton and joins Warley to further his ambitions. He is not corrupted by wealth social climbing or sensuality when he initially arrives in Warley. He becomes a robotic Zombie, a human made up of concrete, a dying man, as a part of his urban exposure and quest for class hopping. He steps into a marriage of convenience with a woman he does not truly love for social and class gains. Attaining social and financial heights he finds that he has lost his independence and enjoyment of life. His deceit and struggle to reach the top did not bring him joy. He keeps reminiscing about his past life which haunts him like a ghost each and every moment.

He continuously compares Warley with Dufton. Cyprus Avenue in Warley is wide, smooth, and loaded with cypresses while Oak Crescent in Dufton is straight with no curves and no trees:

“Cyprus Avenue became at that instant
a symbol of Warley it is as if all my life
I'd been eating the sawdust and thinking
it was bread” (10)

When Mr. Thompson with whom he takes lodging in Warley gives a glimpse of his bed he gets the impression like “if a readymade suit fitted perfectly” (12), The images which belongs to Medici reproduction

“indicate a pattern of gracious living, Still he doesn't
want to show his thrill; after all, he has not being
living in the slums, Joe feels that he is also going
to be a part of high-class-society”.

Joe recalls Aunt Emily's telling him as he opens his dressing gown– "I'd sooner see someone naked Working people look daft in dressing gown" (13). He has made the decision to live this way.

Even the protagonist has many contradictions in his mind and as an afterthought he feels lonely and unhappy –

"I had a childish longing for the ugly rooms
and streets where to be hungry or lost wasn't
possible; for the familiar faces which might
bore or irritate but never hurt or betray."(15)

However when it comes to money he is calculating and manipulating . When Mr. Thompson asks about the place Dufton, he just simply replies that the place is disgusting, very tiny area; factories filled with dust and don't have even a single theatre. The place was just a "Dead Dufton" as he and his friend Charles define this place. Charles a best friend was a person in his life with whom he shares everything about his life. They simply label the rich as "Zombies" who are hollow from inside just pretending to be alive in front of others. Again and again Mrs. Thompson reminds him of his friend Charles. His friend was the first who suggested to step back from Dufton –

"there's nothing in Dufton, Joe,

Leave it before you become a Zombie too.....

.when you go to Warley, Joe, there'll be no more Zombies.

Remember that No more Zombies."

Later in the novel when Mrs. Thompson leaves the place, the protagonist continues to look at a photograph with large frame of the man who is in R.A.F. dress. He just smiles at his own expressions. His personality directly reflects charm and good looks, but this quality somehow does not emerge in the photographs. Joe wants to use his charisma as a stepping stone –

"The possession of charm wasn't in itself

a guarantee of success but it seemed to

follow ambition like a pilot fish."(18)

Sometimes he is just simply enraged due to his status by birth, and social background and blames that not reflecting charm. "It's astounding how often golden hearts and silver spoon in the mouth go together." Thus picture of Maurice gives him a hint of the man's face that he was well aware that it may be nobody compared to him. He is stunned by Mrs. Thompson prominently exhibiting a photograph of her son who is no more. Later he is reminded of the assertions of his friend Charles –

"Zombies always pass away

and they lose people like a parcel or a glove.

And they can't bear to talk of it or to be

reminded of it. They are dead already, that's why.....”

Mrs. Thomson displaying her son's photograph goes against this assertion so she is not a Zombie. As the protagonist arrives at the town hall, he is disappointed when he compares it with Dufton and then moves to the Snow Park, which stands between the stream and woods. He repeatedly makes comparisons with Dufton. Marton's water is so pure and picturesque He believes they are envious of the fact that a child growing up next to the river will be able to swim, sail and fish. As quite the reverse –

“The Langdon at Dufton could and frequently

did drown people; and that was the only

characteristic of a river which it possessed”.

2.The Protagonist's struggle for survival

Joe begins to despise the young man Jack Wales who had never heard the term struggle – struggle for survival and was betrothed to Susan a member of the Theatric club he joins. Both Wales and Susan were affluent due to their privileged backgrounds. His finest uniform on which he still prided himself would seem filthy and poor. “He wouldn't have a best suit; all his clothes would be the best.”(29) As in comparison to Wales, the protagonist only works as Town Hall clerk, a low level pen-pusher, on the verge of becoming a zombie. Joe is disappointed and envious. The dreams that had been hidden deep inside his heart now rise to the surface. Nothing will quell the ferocity of his own desires – “I wanted an Aston Martin, I wanted a three guinea linen shirt, I wanted a girl with a Riviera suntan – these were my rights, I felt, a signed and sealed legacy.” He had made up his mind about what he needs to do and selected the path which he would further his life to achieve his ambitions. He has made the decision to enjoy all the extra frills that a young person loves. He just needs to come up to the by means fair or foul and no one is going to stop him. He is aware the objects which define his desires and envy are attainable but lacks the knowledge of how to do so at that juncture.

Joe becomes part of a theatre group which is like a night club. He equates and often is closer to “wicked, exciting, above all, wealthy world,” (31). When he think of Dufton in 1930, at a time which unemployment affected three quarters of working people resulting starvation, hardships with diseases; where “The streets full of men with faces pasty from bread and margarine and sleeping till noon and their children who wore plimsolls in the depth of winter”. The author does an excellent job of highlighting the post war situations. Politicians have failed to deliver on the promises made to youth. There were visible vices in every political party. Joe wishes to be free of the Dead Dufton memories which can't be faced again. In the First Act, he watches Susan and realizes as he has reached a watershed moment of his life, the point which makes Joe happy is – “She might have been the sister of the girl I'd seen outside Sylvia's Cafe” (36). He has been looking for a grade two woman and finally

found her. Joe and his friend are still calculating the salary of a husband. They are unable to appease a lady of any grade. Joe on the other hand may have a chance because he is almost as likable or a darn sight even additional attractive and shimmering as a Zombie, a man with gleaming red mask and gold Rolex oyster, gold ring, gold cigarette lighter case; but, he doesn't have a bookmaker father.

Wales inherited property by birth, doesn't need to provide for himself and he will normally assign a grade three. This is just the distinction between Joe or him. Joe seems to have fallen for Susan but God knows the truth was different, in fact he is envious of Susan. Joe later discovers through Eva about Susan's marriage plans with Jack Wales. "Bages of money, about seven foot tall and a beautiful R.A.F. moustache" (39) when he faces Jack he feels somewhat inferior. In reality Joe is taking advantage of his good looks in order to have what he wishes and he flashes Susan his perfect grin on which he has spent lot time in practicing. He very well knows that his teeth are not as white and perfect as his opponents.

Joe recognizes that he being a member of another class has been blending in with those with whom he has never come in contact with. Being a thespian in the club, is an indication of a class highbrow character and also there isn't anything to prevent common individuals from going to it. At Thespian he later experiences Alice, an incredible entertainer and a sensual pursuit. He ends up having a sexual relation with her, Joe eventually smothers his sentiments and yearning for Alice for better pastures.

Joe envies Jack Wales for being affluent and attending Cambridge; "I had a mental picture of port wine, boating leisurely discussions over long table gleaming with silver and cut glass. And over it all the atmosphere of power, power speaking impeccable Standard English, power which was power because it was born of the right family, always knew the right people; if you were going to run the country you couldn't do without a University education"(56). How could the lower middle class afford higher education in universities without resources or finances and equate with the affluent elite? An individual from the working or middle class can't be accepted to university solely due to ability to learn how or think broadly. As Cedric said- "All that's necessary is that Jack meets the right people and learns how to get on with them. Blinding with science - isn't that the phrase?"(56) Joe to himself like a petulant child, "I'll pinch your woman, Wales, and all your money won't stop me.". He merely demonstrates that he is a social climber, astute enough to use romance and commitment as a stepping stone. Joe calls her and schedules ballet meet on Saturday.

He despised the slow wind which only killed the poor and the frail and says these lines to himself, "I was the devil of a fellow, I was the lover of a married woman, I was taking out the daughter of one of the richest men in Warley, there wasn't a damn thing I couldn't do. Say what you like of me when I was younger; but certainly was not blas'ed". He recalls his own father as a hard working worker who was too useful to be fired by the management and uncomfortably too vocal in own labour beliefs. He was more comfortable in his own class. He had accepted the fact that the thought in the event that he entered a basic club, He would ride to work in his own vehicle one day, was a dream. His mother generally says that his dad

will die before selling himself for a small amount of money. Unlike Joe his dad was not interested to take advantage of own good looks in obtaining what he needed. Joe believes he'll be best off escaping into a future such as Warley without recollections. Dufton is just squalid, filthy, bleak and contemptible. Joe feels as if two dimensions collide when he gets an invitation for a birthday celebrations from Sally, who comes from wealthy background and lives on the highest point of Warley fields and senses that it is like two distinct universes are uniting. He took advantage of Susan like ascending a staircase and she beams at him from the bottom of her heart without hesitation or pretence.

Joe then goes to Alice and tells her that their relationship is over, but he can't bring himself to look into her eyes. Alice is taken by this change in him. Alice has been admitted to hospital and is in a bad shape. All Joe just needs is to get out of the stuffy room with the stench of ill-health. Joe is overjoyed the following day. He would be happy to live a life of leisure now. However the news Alice had died in a car crash and met a bloody end in the street jolts and shocks him. She was devastated with Joe's dumping her and drove dangerously that ended her life. Joe is mentally maimed. He is not the Joe he was any longer. He begins to despise what he had become : 'Joe the man who killed Alice'. The gentleman in him expresses regret for her passing. Soon he begins to feel ill. He is afraid to come face to face with any of his acquaintances. He doesn't want Joe to control him once more. "Joe Lampton Export Model Mark IA, warranted free of dust, flaws, cracks, dust or pity; . . ." He will wed the supervisor's little girl, he is sharp and virile and attractive, and an ideal man from Dufton, each snag has been mystically made to disappear from his way. He has and achieved success by devious means.

In his mind, queries begin to rear their stupid heads. How will he be able to do everything? Things begin to pound in his head. He belongs in the previous group which he despises and stumbles aimlessly around. He demonstrates that he is a social-climber. He accomplished everything with killing his own true self – "I was the better – looking corpse; they wouldn't need to bury me for a long time yet." (224) Instead of starting revolting against the system or trying to make a transform society he transforms into a Zombie, a no more person.

Conclusion

The novel portrays Joe's obsession with the higher class. Joe, who narrates his life story in a flashback is known to be a self centered person in his younger days and hence ended up what he is in the present. Despite being a rebel Joe is hollow inside. In the words of Bradbury, "John Braine's Room At The Top (1957) is the story as Joe Lampton who exploits his looks and his body to ensure his personal success and his greedy social ascent in the Yorkshire town of Ledders ford and Beyond." (324) It is at the end Joe realizes the enormous cost he has to pay after Alice's death. One realizes at the end that the novel is based on the endless pursuit of happiness and comfort that makes the individual repent eventually.

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