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## **Thematic Concerns in John Braine's Room at the Top**

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**Abstract:**

*The paper aims at identifying the thematic concerns in John Braine's Room at the Top. The novel which depicts the concerns of a generation of post-World War II Britain appeared in 1957 amidst the heat of the angry young decade. Room at the Top traces the fortunes of Joe Lampton, the ambitious youth, who covets the wealth, position and power that his working class origin had not bestowed upon him. The various themes in the novel bring to the fore the spirit of the age in which it was written. Room at the Top deals with the aspirations and ambitions of a protagonist with a working class background, who chooses materialism as his ultimate aim, disguised under the vestiges of a hollow protest and resentment against the rich, but he selects the wrong means to achieve his ends, and stoops in order to conquer. Braine here treats Joe as a human being forced with a crucial problem, whether or not to give up his soul to gain the world. And of course, Joe elects to give up his soul.*

**Key words :** Ambition. success ethics. resentment. protest. materialism. dilemma

John Gerard Braine was a famous British novelist, one of the so-called angry young men, whose much debated novel *Room at the Top* appeared in 1957 amidst the heat of the angry young decade. The novel which depicts the concerns of a generation of post-World War II Britain achieved overnight success. David Daiches acquaints us with the central design of the novel in a nutshell :

“ A more old-fashioned treatment of a modern theme is found in John Braine's *Room at the Top*, less interesting as a novel than as a cultural symptom. The hero, anxious to rise above his working class origins to become a flourishing member of the affluent society whose conspicuous consumption he cannot help envying, destroys the integrity of his personal relationships and corrupts himself in the process, in order to achieve his goal. But he is aware of his self-corruption, and is tortured by it at the same time as he profits by it...”

*Room at the Top* traces the fortunes of Joe Lampton, the ambitious youth, who covets the wealth, position and power that his working class origin had not bestowed upon him. Eager to reach the top at all costs, he forsakes the old path of honesty and industry. Joe, a man of working-class origins goes on to marry the daughter of a wealthy businessman. There are various thematic concerns in the novel.

First and foremost is *the theme of ambition and aspiration*; the desire of working class people to rise above their stature. Abstracted from its social setting, the theme is a study of aspiration, personal ambition, greed and futility of human desire. Joe is excited with the glimpses of lush lawns and big houses in the posh sectors of Warley, symbolically called “the Top.” The leisured opulence and sophistication of Warley adds up to a “pattern of gracious living” that spells repudiation of Joe's working class origin : “It was as if all my life I'd been eating sawdust and thinking it was bread.”(Braine, John. *Room at the Top*,p.10)

Not contented with the upward social mobility gained with the white-collared job at Warley Town Hall, Joe is after a bigger game. Joe's ambitions soar and he is eaten up with a fierce longing for material possessions: “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.”(Braine , *Room at the Top*,p.29).

Second comes *the theme of success ethics* which is pretty closely related to that of ambition. Here the social and moral implications of the kind of methods people in contemporary society adopt for quick success come into question. What means should Joe bring into practice to realize his aim? There were two options before him, keeping in mind his humble origins. The first one was honest industry and sheer hardwork; to emulate his father's example, a trade union leader, a man of principles and integrity, who did not support petty material gains against the murder of his scruples. Old Lampton was a man of stern moral rectitude, who had no regrets whatsoever, regarding the sacrifices he had made in his life. But all this was a part of the old morality. Whereas Joe, like contemporary young men, was too impatient to persevere. He chooses the softer option to get rich quickly. Joe has practically no scruples about the means he is adopting in order to achieve his goals. Joe uses personal charm to win friends and influence people. As a member of the “Warley Thespians,” he plays his part so well that he falls in love with Alice Aisgill who is his senior in age by nine years. Simultaneously, he has a fling with Susan Brown, the nineteen year old daughter of a rich, eminent industrialist of Warley. Joe's sexual exploits came to him as a morale-booster and status-symbol of value. Realizing which side his bread is buttered on, he promises to leave Alice and silences objections from Susan's parents by making her pregnant. He goes on to exploit Alice sexually and emotionally only to dump her later in a brutally indecent manner.

Thirdly there runs *the theme of resentment and protest* of the working class as against the affluent upper class. But all in all, it is a shallow resentment, and a protest without dignity. **Frederick Karl** says about Amis's *Lucky Jim*, "An angry man, if his protest is to have significance, must react in terms beyond his own wants and dislikes. When he is angry or when he rebels, ideas are set into motion – he must stand for something significant, inarticulate though his feelings may be. When however, Lucky Jim is angry, he is a fool ; for his anger often manifests sour grapes, chances offered and withdrawn, opportunities lost."

These observations apply as well to Joe Lampton. Joe wants to run away from the dead, dreary and despicable Dufton with its "back to back houses, the outside privies, the smoke which caught the throat and dirtied linen in a couple of hours, the sense of being always involved in a charade upon Hard Times." ( Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.36).

After reaching Warley, Joe at once realizes the difference between the two places. Now he doesn't want to go back to Dufton at all, and even when he goes there for Christmas, he is full of hatred not only for the place but also for the people of Dufton. *Room at the Top* does seem to reflect through Joe the anger and contempt for the rich class as expressed by the working class people, but the anger here is not an index of desire for changing the social order. Joe is not a protester : he is just a climber and the restlessness of a climber remains with him as he moves ahead rung by rung. So the novel is not a protest but the facade of a protest, under the veils of which the protagonist wants easy success in his life, and fails to rise above the individual level.

Next comes *the theme of materialism*, one of the most significant themes in the novel. Right from the beginning, Joe knew that "the more money a man had, the better looking was his wife." (Braine , *Room at the Top*, p.6). Joe craves for all things material. By deciding to marry Susan he wants to marry class, privilege and money. For he himself confesses that Susan for him is the key to the cave of Alladin, a woman to be devoured and swallowed and enjoyed, rather than to be loved. Joe is so obsessed with the idea of making money and reaching to the top that even when he is sweet-talking to Susan, it is in terms of money :

'Joe, do you really love me ?'

'You know I do.'

'How much?'

'A hundred thousand pounds' worth, I said. 'A hundred thousand pounds' worth.' (Braine , *Room at the Top*,p.140).

Mr Hoylake, the Warley Treasurer asks Joe to stop meeting Miss Brown. Joe doesn't feel the least bit sad that he would be missing Susan but he feels sad he would be missing the things related to Susan,

I might as well face facts : good-bye Susan, good-bye

A big car, good-bye a big house, good-bye power,

good-bye the silly handsome dreams. .'(Braine , *Room at the Top*,p.151).

Joe cares only for commodities, for all things soulless. In his madness for reaching to the top, for money and power and status, he plays havoc with the emotions of Alice Aisgill and is indirectly responsible for her gruesome accident. Braine's novel reveals that money can undermine one's basic humanity. The burning desire for easy money can alienate us from the society and more so, from our loved ones. Joe finally realizes the hollowness of his goals as compared to the heavy spiritual cost he had to pay for achieving them when he thinks of "all the muck one's forced to wade through to get what one wants." (Braine , *Room at the Top*,p.8).

Lastly, there is also *the theme of choice – the dilemma*. The choice is between love and money, feeling and reason, between material success and moral advancement. For sometime Joe remains in a moral tension, as to what his course of action should be, but soon he resolves it and decides, in fact, chooses the baser things like money and status, and dismisses the qualms of his conscience. He chooses sharp practices and dirty tricks over success through genuine merit. He declares an open war against society and tries to grab success by hook and crook, means fair or foul. This moral choice of his eventually becomes a wrong choice, symbolic and crucial choice, the test of his character. He knows that his love for Alice cannot give him the kind of impetus he is seeking. Only Susan can make him rich. So he dumps Alice in favour of Susan Brown. It is only later that he realizes the ramifications of his decision; as to what he has gained, and what he has lost over the years. **Frederick Karl** rightly comments on Joe Lampton's confusion about love and money in the following words:

Like Defoe, whom he often resembles, Braine allows his predatory hero to confuse love with money. Joe Lampton is, as it were, a Robinson Crusoe, carving an empire for him on the island of England, dropping and picking up love as his need may be, acutely aware of the demeaning power of a love that does not pay off and the exultant power of a love that does. Marriage to Susan is rewarded in every possible way except that of self-fulfilment; but Joe chooses her.

Braine here treats Joe as a human being forced with a crucial problem, whether or not to give up his soul to gain the world. And of course, Joe elects to give up his soul.

To sum up, *Room at the Top* revolves around the aspirations and ambitions of a protagonist with a working class background, who chooses materialism as his ultimate aim, guised under the vestiges of a hollow protest and resentment against the rich, but he selects the wrong means to achieve his ends, and stoops in order to conquer. The novel is a true representation of the conditions and mindsets of the people of that age.

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