epff9 talk Gloom at the Top.

Room At The Top. (1959) Jack Clayton, from the novel by John Braine (1957).

I have titled my paper ‘Gloom At The Top’ I hope the following comments go some way towards explaining why!

John Braine’s novel Room at the Top and Jack Clayton’s film of the same name have much in

common, besides the latter being a more or less faithful adaptation of the former with a screen

play by Neil Paterson. Importantly they share a similar place in the pantheon of British post war cultural life.

Both the novel and the film are now considered to be prime examples of the artistic vanguard of the late 1950’s.

Braine the novelist, along with other writers such as Kingsley Amis, John Osbourne, Alan Sillitoe, etc, were all part of the literary movement that came to be known as the ‘Angry Young Men’. Clayton the film’s director was less than happy to be described as angry and young, being 40 at the time of the films release but none the less shared some of his literary colleague’s sensibilities and his critically esteemed film is now considered to have inaugurated the realist tradition in British cinema called the British New Wave. The film version of Room at the Top was immensely popular with the public, controversial for its frank and challenging take on sex and class and was shortly followed by equally gritty films about working class life directed by such luminaries as Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger and Karel Reisz.

There is much one can say about the film in terms of its post war and post imperial background. The fiasco and national shame of Suez was very recent and the social expectations of the British post war population were high and getting higher. Class privileges were increasingly questioned and the merits of the established order, robustly challenged. Middle class gentility and the moral war time codes of self sacrifice as exemplified in Lean’s film Brief Encounter were considered in many intellectual circles to be elitist and twee. Patriotic writers who beat the drum for King and country like Coward and Rattigan were out, along with the brilliant but snobbish likes of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. The favoured subjects of artistic endeavour were gritty realism and ‘frankness’. There was an explosion of writers from humble backgrounds in the north and south of the country with an axe to grind, an injustice to right and a tale to tell of overlooked working class subcultures.

Yet the character of Joe Lampton whilst not without some sympathetic qualities is not what one might choose as the ideal of a worthy class avenger. He is no working class hero that would fit John Lennon’s anti-materialist bill! True he is decidedly not passive and lumpen but his fierce ambition coupled with his sense of entitlement, which he never doubts, leads him onwards and upwards. He knows what's his due and his right to ascend up the greasy pole is never in question. This rise, often at the expense of others, doesn't come with many qualms or hints of an underlying moral code. He is anything but the admirable antihero and is a questionable cipher for many of the justifiable causes for social change that were brewing in the culture.

We are vividly shown more than once that Joe Lampton comes from a deprived and bleak external world that is all too real but we are also told Joe sees little in his class that could redeem itself, and he seems to live in a corresponding inner world of emotional squalor and poverty with little faith in family or community. Yet his lack of perceived worth in his own origins is subtly contradicted by his aunt and uncle. On a return visit they are rather nonplussed and alarmed by his unalloyed ambition and he is reminded by his concerned aunt of Polonius’s words to Hamlet “To thine own self be true” and again gently warned not to sell himself for ‘a handful of silver’. The handful of silver is a line from Robert Browning’s poem, The Lost Leader (1845).

‘Just for a handful of silver he left us,

Just for a ribbon to stick to his coat

Browning’s poem berates his former idol Wordsworth for betraying the liberal causes of his youth and turning to conservative values in later life, a subject we will return to later. The handful of silver is a reference to the 30 pieces Judas is paid for his betrayal of Christ. It is interesting that such literary references are subtly or unconsciously put in the mouth of his supposed philistine aunt with no education, who’s world Joe betrays and rejects on the basis of its worthlessness.

All we know of Joe’s parents is that they are an absence, having been killed by a bomb in the war. However we see no signs in Joe of any loss or filial loyalty to his folks. He seems to lack the internal warmth and love that would provide some emotional strength and continuity with his past. A warmth that would link him with some of the good things in his background. Contrast this with a later working class writer like Denis Potter who creates characters who are deeply conflicted by their social mobility and troubled by abandoning their roots because they retain deep affection for their origins.

Joe Lampton is alienated from his past and only looks forward to a future that's different. This is identical to his creator Braine who said that he could’t wait to get away from his roots and never turn back. Joe is an orphan with no parents and no history, Joe has little memory or awareness of what needs to be cherished and what might need to ditched. The room at the top is the place he's headed with little idea of what's actually there. The top room is more valued for what it's not than what it is. At least its not like where he starts from even if he has only the vaguest of ideas where he’s headed. We get little sense of the contents of Joe’s dream of the good life except a pained and aching sense of what he doesn’t possess. In a telling exchange with his smug rival and fellow prisoner of war Jack Wales he bitterly complains that unlike the privileged Wales he had nothing at home worth trying to escape back too! His POW camp experience was more like home from home but with more leisure time. If Joe Lampton were ever to be a socialist (which he certainly isn't!) it would probably be the vengeful type that goes around scratching Rolls Royces, seeking revenge for injustices rather than the Ken Loach approach who’s anger could be seen to have a loving element that seeks justice for neglected communities and mobilises collective action for the benefit of all.

When he first espies Susan and the flash car from his lofty hight, he is a newly arrived outsider in a rented flat, in a posh part of town but he says “I'm going to have that”

not “I want that” or I'd like some of that. The chilling quality of that simple statement comes from its omnipotent and delusional belief in the power of possession. But deep down Joe posses very little, whether it happens to be self worth or self awareness.

The posters which sold the film at the time of its release shouted boldly; ‘A savage story of lust and ambition’. In Joe’s mind sex, social status, and material possession are inseparable. To be fair to Joe none of the other central characters with whom he intersects have much of a moral compass either, or if they do, they can't, because of desperation and insecurity, afford to listen to it too carefully. They seem to range from the ingenue Susan, overprotected and lost in her dreams of romantic love, who fails to perceive Joe in any real sense, repeating “Wasn't it absolutely wonderful” about their 1st sexual encounter and the same refrain again on their wedding day, blinded to Joe’s inner turmoil and despair—all the way through to Alice’s cruel reptilian husband George. Along the way we meet Susan’s snobbish and cold mother, her plutocratic father, and the forlorn and depressed Alice who painfully tries to find solace and escape in an affair with a younger and crucially immature Joe who can't really provide her emotionally with what she needs. This is a cynical world not unlike our current Trump universe where dog eats dog and the meek get used or trampled under foot. In this world there are only winners and losers and Joe is alert enough to be determined he will be a winner. The sequel Life at the Top confirms what we all expect that having got to his top room the story ends badly for all the protagonists with no one finding much happiness or fulfilment.

In the limited time left I would like to examine this cynical world and the bad faith of its inhabitants a bit more and propose some contributory psychological factors.

Braine in his youthful years as well as writing novels and poetry was a left wing commentator and CND activist. Later in life, like his fellow left leaning angry, (by now old) comrades Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, John Osbourne, he had moved radically to the right. Brain publicly advocated the raising of a private right wing army and wrote a pamphlet, ‘Goodbye to the Left’ published by the Monday Club a right wing group of the Conservative party. Like his character Joe Lampton there was no pretence to any faith in social change or the search for a more just world, only individualistic self preservation mustered conviction. Braine a heavy smoker and drinker took some pleasure in being a pamphleteering pugilist.Ditto Clayton, though not as overtly political as Braine, Clayton was also a difficult man not comfortable with himself or his times. By the end of his career he had completed only 7 feature films and at odds with many of his fellow producers and the film industry at large. Only one other film arguably his masterpiece, The Innocents an adaptation of Henry James’s novella The Turn of The Screw, achieved the same critical success as Room At The Top.

One of Clayton’s editors remembers him thus;

‘He was a complex man, he drank too much, smoked too much and was dangerously unpredictable. Jack was a bar room brawler who would if provoked, attack other people with his fists.

He was also charming and seductive which masked many of his faults. He had a sadistic sense of playing practical jokes on the innocent’.

Is his editor making a sly hint here as to why Clayton chose James’s novella which amongst other things is about childhood cruelty masked in innocence. Besides the drinking and brawling does something of Clayton’s character remind us of Joe Lampton’s sado/masochistic relationship to both Susan and Alice and too the power relations of their social worlds?

As I have already mentioned not all W/C writers responded to social inequalities as Braine and his fellow reactionaries did, Potter being a case in point. Braine is a classic example of someone who when young was a committed and active left wing radical who in middle age became disillusioned and moved to the right and conservative values. The unforgiving bitterness of the disappointed revolutionary all to often mutates into the curmudgeonly reactionary. A cynical dislike of the present coupled with the loss of hope for a radically different future can become a bitterness for the loss of an idealised past. It is my contention that Joe Lampton is the child of such a disillusioned imagination!

From a psychoanalytic perspective we could make a great deal of Joe’s oedipal sexual jealousy and possessiveness, for example his questions to his lover Alice as to whether she continues to have sex with her husband or his rage at learning of her youthful naked modelling or his confusion and impulses to rescue Alice as a mother figure from her own depression and the brutish control of her husband. However in my view a deeper insight is afforded if we interrogate what the room at the top may unconsciously represent.

Melanie Klein has pointed out that emotional deprivation in early life reinforces in the infantile mind the compensatory phantasy of a supremely good idealised figure or state of affairs. In my view such a phantasy underpins the extreme versions of belief in revolutionary change and the cynical bitter retreat to a misanthropic view of human nature that is embodied in the character of Joe Lampton when this idealisation collapses.

If the room at the top is believed to contain endless bliss, just out of reach, its eventual occupation can only lead to disillusionment and the counter-belief that present reality is a huge disappointment. Endless bliss turns to endless gloom at the top, to cynicism or the pursuit of yet another idealised solution as a desperate attempt to evade despair. If the place at the top is so profoundly idealised it is the place we have never truly occupied and never will. To reach heaven we must first agree to be dead to the messiness and compromises of real life.

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