

An analysis of motifs in a room with a view



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BUSTER**

“ For a moment [George] contemplated her, as one who had fallen out of heaven. He saw radiant joy in her face, he saw the flowers beat against her dress in blue waves. The bushes above them closed. He stepped quickly forward and kissed her” (Forster 55). This scene from E. M. Forster’s *Room with a View* triggers a profound internal struggle within Lucy Honeychurch, the novel’s protagonist, initiating her quest for true passion and independence. Indeed, this scene exemplifies how Forster uses motifs—including light vs. dark and outside spaces vs. inside spaces—to develop the novel’s themes. Throughout *A Room with a View*, the author employs the motifs of outdoor vs. indoor places, light vs. dark and Renaissance vs. Medieval to illustrate the themes of freedom from social conventions, the value of honesty, and the contrast between Victorian and Edwardian social ideas.

Forster uses the motif of indoor vs. outdoor places, or rooms vs. views, to exemplify the shift from traditional Victorian ideals to Edwardian values and to demonstrate the beauty of finding freedom from social restrictions. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator associates progressive-minded characters with “ views.” For instance, the first words uttered by Mr. Emerson in the novel are, “ I have a view, I have a view,” meaning that Emerson’s room at the Pension Bertolini has a picturesque view (Forster 4). When Lucy Honeychurch enters her room, she opens the window and breathes the “ clean night air,” but when Miss Bartlett enters a room, she immediately fastens the shutters and locks the door (Forster 11). By associating modern, progressive characters with views and more traditional characters with rooms early in the novel, Forster indicates that indoor spaces

symbolize restrictive social conventions, while wide, outdoor spaces and views reflect open-mindedness and innovative ideas. This motif takes on further significance in light of England's passage in the early 20th century from traditional Victorian society into the more modern, Edwardian culture. Hence, throughout the novel, the contrast between outdoor and indoor spaces parallels the contrast between socially conservative, older characters such as Miss Bartlett and Mrs. Honeychurch and forward-minded, Edwardian-era characters such as George and Mr. Emerson. The motif of rooms vs. views also accentuates the value of freedom from social conventions. Cecil, the embodiment of upper-class snobbery and petty societal values, is compared to a "drawing-room" with no view (Forster 86). In contrast, during one of the most refreshing scenes in the novel, George, Freddy and Mr. Beebe romp in the outdoors near the Sacred Lake, a place symbolic of freedom from social conventions (Forster 106). When the three strip off their clothes, they cast off the burden of social conventions, and their joy in romping around the lake exemplifies the bliss found in liberation from the norm. Hence, the motif of outdoors vs. indoors enables Forster to contrast Victorian ideas with Edwardian ones, and to emphasize how freedom from social conventions can bring true joy.

Besides using this motif, Forster also uses the motif of light vs. dark to communicate his theme of honesty vs. deception. One of the clearest examples of this motif occurs when George first kisses Lucy amid a sea of violets: "light and beauty" enveloped Lucy and "radiant joy" was in her face (Forster 55). Similarly, after George confronts Lucy about Cecil's hard-heartedness, "the scales" fall from Lucy's eyes and she beholds the truth

about Cecil (Forster 138). Though this does not mention light directly, the image of scales brings to mind the biblical story of the Apostle Paul's encounter with a blinding light on the road to Damascus. Thus, both of these examples illustrate how Forster associates light with beauty and honesty. Conversely, darkness comes when Lucy tries to deceive others and to deny her passionate love for George. After Lucy pretends that she does not love George, she enters the "vast armies of the benighted"; the night envelops her in its grim embrace (Forster 143). This image of night symbolizes Lucy's own intellectual darkness and confusion. Night also has connotations of evil; the reader anticipates that some devilish misfortune will fall upon Lucy if she continues her web of lies. Through this motif of light vs. dark, Forster draws upon biblical undertones and literature's tradition of associating these images with good and evil. Hence, the author communicates that deceiving oneself, as illustrated by Lucy's refusal to recognize her love of George, can only lead to painful consequences and to that dreaded "muddle" described as worse than "Death and Fate" (Forster 165). Forster thus emphasizes the value of forsaking the darkness of deception and pursuing the purity and beauty of honesty. Clearly, through this motif of light vs. dark, Forster expands his theme of the value of honesty.

Forster uses a third motif, Renaissance vs. Medieval, to contrast Victorian and Edwardian views on gender roles and the nature of love. Throughout the novel, "Medieval" symbolizes Victorian ideas, while "Renaissance" reflects Edwardian ideas. For instance, Cecil Vyse, "Gothic" in appearance and ascetic in his tastes, is the archetype of the Medieval man (Forster 71). Indeed, his views on gender roles reflect the ideals of the Victorian age: men

should always protect and guide women. In fact, Lucy is merely an object, “a work of art,” to Cecil (Forster 78). In regards to love, Cecil believes that it should always be delicate, rational, bound to convention. Conversely, the Emersons exude a Renaissance spirit—it is no coincidence that the reader is first introduced to them in Florence, the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance. Unlike Cecil’s paternalistic attitude, George Emerson says he wants Lucy to have her own thoughts and have equal status (Forster 136). In addition, George’s father voices a more modern view on love: “Passion is sanity,” he says to Lucy (Forster 162). The contrasts between the Medieval and the Renaissance, between paternalism and equality, and between reason and passion underscore the shift from Victorian social decorum to the more modern, Edwardian values. Ultimately, Lucy embraces this Edwardian spirit and finds greater satisfaction in the Renaissance man than in the Medieval. Thus, Forster uses the motif of the Renaissance vs. Medieval to accentuate the contrast between Victorian and Edwardian ideas.

In short, each of these motifs enables Forster to develop his themes, whether it be the value of freedom from social norms or the need to embrace the truth about oneself. Truly, Forster’s use of imagery, detail and symbolism in these motifs makes the novel’s themes far more enduring than if he had simply relied on other, less vivid means. Renaissance and Medieval, light and dark, a room and a view—these are the images that will abide in the reader’s mind long after the narrative has ceased.

Works Cited Forster, E. M. *A Room with a View*. Dover Publications, 1995.