

Antithesis “Life – Death” in the Novel by John Braine “Room at the Top”

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To cite this article:

Yuliya Alexandrovna Kutsevich, Elena Evgenievna Markadeeva. Antithesis “Life – Death” in the Novel by John Braine “Room at the Top”. *English Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 2, No. 6, 2017, pp. 94-98. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20170206.11

Received: September 24, 2017; **Accepted:** October 18, 2017; **Published:** November 22, 2017

Abstract: The article studies the images of two towns, Warley and Dufton, in the famous novel by John Braine “Room at the Top” (1957). The authors of the article compare the images in question and find out the stylistic devices (metaphor, detachment, alliteration, polysyndeton, etc) that enabled John Braine to create two opposite literary images related to each other through the antithesis “life – death”, in which, in the hero’s view, the notion of life is associated with Warley, whereas the notion of death is implied by Dufton.

Keywords: Stylistic Device, John Braine, Room at the Top, Literary Image, Antithesis “Life – Death”

1. Introduction

“Room at the top”, a well-known piece of fiction written by the English novelist John Braine, can be regarded as an anti-manifest of “success philosophy” (2010, 4). The story is narrated by the main character, Joe Lampton, a participant of World War II and an ex-prisoner of war. Joe originates from work environment and aims to leave it by all means. Aspiring to reach the top of society, which is equal to success, in Joe’s opinion, the hero is ready to give up morality, his parents, killed during an air raid, had taught him. However, the main obstacle in his path to a better life is not only his origin, which oppresses him, but the town, where he was born and grew up. Thus, Dufton, a small provincial English town, is far from Joe’s idea of the place, where well-off and successful people live. With all his heart wishing to free himself from the routine and poverty of Dufton, Joe leaves it with a view to settling down in the town of big opportunities – Warley. Arriving at this town, sparkling with cleanness and beckoning invitingly, Joe continues thinking of Dufton, remembering its streets, its citizens and their hard life, and comparing all these with the advantages of Warley. This collision between “the hero and his milieu” (Shelestiuk, 2002), between the hero and circumstances, and, more specifically, between his self-contradictions is the essence of

the literary conflict of the novel. The aim of this research is to bring to light the most significant conceptual constituents of the two contrasting literary images – those of Dufton and Warley – as well as find out the linguistic means of various levels that emphasize the aforementioned components of the images under study. The ultimate result of this analytic approach to the novel is a better understanding of “the author’s image of the world, expressed in a literary text by means of the system of key images, themes, and expressive language means” (Alexandrovich, 2014).

2. The Idea of Death in the Image of Dufton

2.1. Artistic Details of the Image

Artistic details in a laconic form denote a multi-aspect idea, phenomenon, or fact in a literary text. They also function as an expressive means of building up an image, their aim being to depict the image as a whole in accordance with the author’s idea of it. As Luiza Şoşu notes, “the artistic detail is the representation of the outer characteristic of an object or phenomenon as a basis for further reproducing of the whole and integral picture of the represented by the recipient, i.e. the reader” (2013).

Thus, the image of Dufton as a miserable place is primarily created through the description of Joe’s strong belief in the disadvantages of the place. Nothing in this town seems to the hero to correspond with its name or function: Oak Crescent Street, where Joe used to live, has neither a curve nor a bush, and the river Langdon resembles a river only by the fact that there “frequently do drown people” (Braine, 2002).

Joe compares his life in Dufton with sawdust, while real, wholesome, and happy life, promised by Warley, seems to him similar to the source of life, to bread:

“<...> it was as if all my life I’d been eating sawdust and thinking it was bread” (Braine, 2002).

As is represented in Example 1, Joe expresses his feelings for Dufton, where life is like the remains of a dead tree, sawdust, and death, in fact, and for Warley, which, in his view, is equal to life at its best.

Among the many disadvantages of Warley Joe also mentions lack of entertainments:

“A lot of mills. And a chemical factory. And a grammar school and a war memorial and a river that runs different colours each day. And a cinema and fourteen pubs. That’s really all one can say about it” (Braine, 2002).

As can be seen in Example 2, describing Dufton, according to Joe, one can mention only a few uninteresting facts and that is all what can be said about this town. To Joe’s mind, everything that is said by him about Dufton, is tiresome and hardly worth attention.

From Joe Lampton’s inner monologues the reader also learns that Dufton is a commonplace city with commonplace citizens. Joe and his friend Charles never call it other than Dead Dufton. The friends compare its residents, identically “dead”, to zombies, giving each of them a peculiar name. So, for example, Joe’s former chief is referred to as “Efficient Zombie”:

“He had a large head with short oiled hair and an absolutely immobile face. It wasn’t dignified or even stony, it was dead” (Braine, 2002).

Example 3 shows that, in Joe’s opinion, the name “zombie” like no other corresponds to the chief’s appearance.

Talking about the citizens of Dufton in general, Joe and Charles lay special stress on the fact that each of them is dead and they only pretend to be alive:

“It’s pathetic when they pretend to be alive, n’est-ce pas?” (Braine, 2002).

In Example 4, recalling his life in Dufton, Joe describes the house, where he lived, and the relatives, who gave him shelter. Joe loves them, but dreaming of a better life, he does not understand his relatives and does not accept their way of life that he finds “too sordid to be funny” (Braine, 2002):

“They were kind and good and generous; they weren’t my sort of person any longer” (Braine, 2002).

Example 5 shows that, returning from Warley to Dufton on Christmas Eve, Joe looks at his close people as if they are strangers to him.

Gradually, Joe comprehends that the life of his relatives does not change. Moreover, they do not wish for any

changes. In Joe’s opinion, living a life of routine, the residents of Dufton neither understand true beauty nor enjoy life. Thus, a picture, in their view, is only a piece of furniture, and a dressing gown, that is not appropriate for a working person, is “the livery of idleness and decadence” (Braine, 2002).

Thus, in the eyes of Joe Dufton is a dead place, wherein people bury themselves alive. On account of the fact that people from Joe’s circle remind him that he was born in Dufton, there appears another reason for him to be overcome with highly negative feelings towards the place:

“I hate my hometown <...> Dufton’s awful. It stinks. Literally. It’s dead as mutton” (Braine, 2002).

Proceeding with the evaluative characterization of Dufton illustrated in Example 6, Joe calls his native town dead, dirty, dreary, and despicable:

“Dead Dufton,” I muttered to myself. “Dirty Dufton, Dreary Dufton, Despicable Dufton – then stopped. It was too quiet. There were lights in the windows but they seemed as if put there to deceive – follow them and you were over the precipice, crashing into the witch’s cave to labour in the mills forever” (Braine, 2002).

The image of Dufton in Example 7 becomes still more sinister, when Joe calls it the witch’s cave, where man labours to death.

It should be noted, that Dufton is also Joe Lampton’s past, his dead parents and his childhood. Despite his dislike of the city, Joe is closely linked with it. Being torn between memories of his family and the desire to significantly change his life, Joe begins hating the town even more. As is clear from Example 8, in his eyes Dufton resembles the staging of Charles Dickens’ novel “Hard Times”:

“I saw it against the background of Dufton, the back-to-back houses, the outside privies, the smoke which caught the throat and dirtied clean linen in a couple of hours, the sense of being always involved in a charade upon Hard Times” (Braine, 2002).

Thus, Coketown is described in the aforementioned novel in the following way: “It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it <...> It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye <...> It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next” (2000, 18).

As can be seen in the passage, the images of both places, of Dufton and Dickens’ Coketown, are so much alike that Joe Lampton’s explicit comparison seems to be fairly reasonable. The striking likeness of the two descriptions makes the impression that all this is said about one and the same town.

2.2. Linguistic Expression of the Image

The artistic details of the image in question, explored in

the previous paragraph of this research paper, are additionally emphasized in the text with the help of various stylistic means, employed by the author of the novel. In view of this fact, in this part of our work we will focus on the linguistic aspects of the aforementioned Examples 1-8 from the text.

Thus, in Example 1, aiming to more precisely convey to the reader the emotions of the hero, arriving at Warley for the first time, the author introduces a rather conspicuous metaphor into his speech. Joe compares the “bread” of full life in Warley with the “sawdust” of unhappy life in Dufton. Thus, with the help of the trope under review the hero utilizes a basic scheme “by which people conceptualise their experience and their external world” (2004).

As can be seen from Example 2, the author employs such stylistic devices as detachment and polysyndeton that impart additional expressiveness to Joe’s speech and imply his negative attitude towards the town. Furthermore, these devices enable the writer, on the one hand, to create a literary effect of some monotony in the given description of Dufton and, on the other hand, to increase the general “emotional impact of the text” (Gurevich, 2017) directly linked with the idea of Joe’s antagonism towards Dufton.

In Example 3, to describe the repulsive image of Joe’s chief, entirely “lifeless”, the following lexemes with negative connotations, “brought forth by the context” (2016), are used in the novel: “oiled”, “immobile”, “dead”. Joe’s belief in the correctness of the description is emphasized by the adverb “absolutely”.

Example 4 shows that the author explicitly expresses Joe and Charles’ scornful attitude to the residents of the town, who evoke only the friends’ pity, trying to pretend to be alive. It should be noted that, in our view, the ironic phrase “it’s pathetic” precisely enough conveys Charles and Joe’s disapproval of Duftoners’ image which exists in their minds.

The complex nature of Example 5 reflects Joe’s mixed feelings about the residents of Dufton. On the one hand, polysyndeton (“and”), that “causes each member of a string of facts to stand out conspicuously” (2014), emphasizes the lexemes *kind*, *good*, and *generous*. This suggests that Joe appreciates the qualities of his relatives, denoted by these adjectives. However, on the other hand, absence of a connective (e. g. *but*) between two logically related sentences in the example implies a well-considered decision of the hero to end his relationship with the wrong “sort of person”, his family from Dufton, and forget his past for good. The noun *sort*, expressing the idea of Joe’s distinguishing between “sorts” of people in Dufton and Warley, as well as the phrase *not ... any longer* add to the meaning.

As can be seen in Example 6, adverting to detachment again, the author draws the reader’s attention not solely to the negative characteristics of Dufton, but also to the degree of Joe’s rejection of his native town. Furthermore, in the creation of the image of Dufton the role of lexemes with negative connotations (hate, awful, stinks, dead), that get additional expressiveness due to the adverb “literally”, is evident. The “set of associations that a word’s use can evoke” (Babich, 2017) allows us to view the noun “mutton” in the

given context as a lexeme with a negative connotation as well, since it implies the meaning “dead animal”.

In Example 7 the author uses such stylistic devices as alliteration, metaphor, negative evaluative vocabulary, and repetition. Thus, as Valeria A. Kukharencova notes, “a phoneme, according to the studies of several last decades, has a strong associative and sound-instrumenting power” (2016). In art texts alliteration, or repetition of initial consonant phonemes, often serves as an emphasizing means of expression of feelings and emotions. According to a number of theories, certain sounds have their inherent connotations, or special expressiveness, that is most comprehensible in case of alliteration. Within this point of view in English fiction sounds are considered to have their own connotation and, for example, “the sound [d] prompts the feeling of anxiety, fear, horror, anguish or all these feelings simultaneously” (2014). It appears that in the text fragment in question the multiple repetition of the sound [d] not only amplifies the gloomy sentiment of Joe’s statement, but also implies the idea of death, previously mentioned by him and inextricably linked with Dufton.

In addition to the phonemic level of expression, by means of the metaphor “the witch’s cave”, the author creates the image of the netherworld, which, to the hero’s mind, Dufton is for any person, who aspires for an easy life. This idea of danger, harm, and failure, associated for Joe with Dufton, is also expressed by the meanings of the lexemes *crashing into* and *precipice*. According to dictionary definitions, the meaning of the former contains the components “damage” and “failure” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). The latter denotes both “a very steep side of a cliff or a mountain” and, figuratively, “a dangerous situation that could lead to harm or failure” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). The verbs *to labour* and *to deceive* also represent examples of negative evaluative vocabulary in the text fragment in question. Stylistic repetition in its turn serves for aims of emphasis and expresses Joe’s profoundly negative feelings for Dufton.

Example 8 describes Joe’s negative attitude towards his native town by means of contextually dependent negative connotations in the lexical meaning of the following lexemes: outside, privies, dirtied, smoke. The noun *charade*, denoting “an absurd pretense intended to create a pleasant or respectable appearance” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017), contains the negative evaluative connotation in its dictionary definition. Both this noun and the adjective *hard* in the title of Charles Dickens’ novel express Joe’s rejection of the town more explicitly.

3. The Idea of Life in the Image of Warley

3.1. Artistic Details of the Image of Warley

In contrast to Dufton, Warley, created in the image and likeness of the author’s native city Bradford (2003), is a prosperous town, where, to Joe’s mind, dreams come true. In Warley Cyprus Avenue is, indeed, lined with cypresses, and

the water of the Merton River is so clear that one can distinguish the colour of stones at the bottom and see the fish that inhabit it. Warley is a town, wherein luxurious automobiles are carelessly left on the highway, wherein citizens look after their gardens, and wherein a feeling of happiness and prosperity appears. Therefore, in Joe’s view, Warley is a very different world:

“I saw roads and houses which I’d never seen before – big square houses, broad roads, not black and grey, but all white and clean” (Braine, 2002).

As can be seen from Example 9, Dufton and Warley are so clearly opposed to each other that even the atmosphere in the houses of the latter differs from that in Dufton. For instance, a picture is an integral part of the elegant lifestyle of the citizens of Warley, and a bathroom in the house of Joe’s landlady, Mrs. Thompson, is so clean that Joe cannot get used to the cleanness:

“Warley’s alive. I felt that from the first moment I set foot in the place. And there’s so much of it, too <...> It’s even got a history” (Braine, 2002).

In Example 10 Joe emphasizes that Warley, unlike Dufton, is not dead, since it has its own history, while during the whole war Dufton saw only one bomb that hit his parents’ house.

Warley is the place where one can have future. Joe notices that people living in Warley are not in the least like Duftoners, and his new chief is a complete opposite of Efficient Zombie. Recalling his former job, Joe compares it with the feelings he has for the new workplace:

“We were a team of professionals, not a collection of adding-machines <...> I was for the first time completely happy in my work” (Braine, 2002).

From Example 11 it is clear that Joe likes the fact that his new job is not a kind of routine, and people, who he works with, do not look like “a collection of adding-machines” (Braine, 2002).

Besides all the advantages Warley has for Joe, it is also devoid of memories, which haunt him in Dufton:

“<...> for the first time I’d lived in a place without memories. And for the first time *lived* in a place” (Braine, 2002).

Example 12 depicts Joe’s reluctance to leave Warley, its luxurious life, and rich nature. He is ready to part with his beloved Alice, with whom he gets acquainted in Warley, only not to spoil his reputation in the town and not to leave it. However, will Warley remain the place without memories? Joe’s decision is taken in Example 13:

“I loved it all, right down to the red-brick front of the Christadelphian reading room and the posters outside the Colesium and Royal cinemas, I couldn’t leave it. And if I married Alice I’d be forced to leave it” (Braine, 2002).

Eventually, Joe calls Warley his home, which he would firmly prefer to Dufton:

“I’d go home – for Warley, after all, was my home, I’d chosen it myself” (Braine, 2002).

In Example 14, naming Warley his home and evaluating success in life through the prism of material success, Joe

Lampton clearly distinguishes two opposite worlds: his past, left in Dufton, and the happy future he is looking forward to in Warley:

“But I couldn’t stay in her world any longer. Already, drying my face and hands on a large soft towel, looking out of the corner of my eye at the dressing gown hanging behind the door <...> and breathing the room’s odour of perfume and cleanliness, I had a footing in a very different world” (Braine, 2002).

Thus, as can be seen from Example 15, Warley is the town of the hero’s dreams, his hope for a better life. Joe cannot leave it and is determined to do everything to settle down there and reach the top of the social ladder.

3.2. Linguistic Expression of the Image

In this part of our study we will consider the linguistic aspects of the aforementioned Examples 9-15, to highlight the stylistic devices that contribute to the formation of the integral image of Warley.

In Example 9 through the antithesis “beautiful – ugly” the author opposes the two towns, the opposition being realized by means of the following lexemes, which function as linguistic or contextual antonyms: black and white (linguistic antonyms), grey and clean (contextual antonyms). The latter pair of lexemes in the context under review expresses opposite notions “not good-looking, plain vs. beautiful, attractive”. Additionally, the opposition between Warley and Dufton in this case takes place on the syntactic level – through the construction *not only... but*.

To emphasize the contrast between Warley and Dufton, in Example 10 the author uses the adjective “alive”, its positive connotation being opposed to the negative evaluation of the idea of death, characterizing Dufton.

The metaphor “adding-machines” in Example 11 depicts Duftoners, who are not people, to the hero’s mind, but “a collection” of inanimate things. The metaphor is a constituent part of the antithesis “professionals – adding-machines”, wherein the word “professionals” stands for the residents of Warley. Thus, the noun *professionals*, expressing the meaning “people”, and the noun *adding-machines*, implying the meaning “things”, can be treated as contextual antonyms. The general idea of this opposition characterizes the inhabitants of Warley as living people, and those of Dufton – as dead ones.

In Example 12 the verb “*lived*” is marked by graphic means, which “are used to convey the intensity of the stress, emphasizing and thus foregrounding the stressed words” (2016). In the text fragment in question the graphic changes lend additional expressiveness to the contrast Joe feels between the feeling of life in Warley and the feeling of death in Dufton. The author also adverts to another form of expressiveness, using the polysemantic word “live” in two meanings. In the first case (“I’d lived in a place”) the word means “to make one’s home in a particular place”, while in the second case (“*lived* in a place”) it signifies “to remain alive” and “to have an exciting or fulfilling life” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Both stylistic devices allow the author to

explicitly express Joe's positive attitude towards Warley, and hence to imply his negative attitude towards Dufton.

The phrase "love it all" in Example 13 expresses a positive evaluative connotation contained in the noun *love*. The connotation is significantly intensified by the lexemes *all* and *down to*, the latter of the two meaning "even including the following small or unimportant things or people" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). In addition, the expressive vocabulary unit *love* is accompanied by asyndeton ("I loved it all <...>, I couldn't leave it"). Deliberate omission of a connective between the two semantically connected sentences results in the effect of a certain pause between Joe's thoughts, which suggests the logical and decisive nature of his conclusion ("I couldn't leave it"), as well as his love for Warley.

In Example 14 a dash, as a graphic means, introduces into Joe's speech a longer pause, emphasizing the noun *home* and making it semantically equal to Warley. Repetition of *home* also contributes to that effect. Omission of a connective ("I'd go home <...>, I'd chosen it myself"), analogously to the previous example, implies Joe's decision by no means to leave Warley.

To depict Joe's affection for Warley in Example 15, the author uses the following units with a contextually positive connotation: large, soft, odour of perfume, cleanness, a different world. In the latter case the context allows us to specify the meaning of *different* and view the meaning of the whole phrase as that of *a better world*. The noun "dressing gown" also appears to express a positive evaluation, being for the hero a symbol of a prosperous life.

4. Conclusion

Thus, our research showed that in the novel in question the antithesis "life – death" is realized both explicitly and implicitly through the contrast images of Dufton and Warley that played a significant role in the hero's life. The basis of the opposition is the dichotomy "life – death", "Dead Dufton" – "Living Warley".

It is essential to pay attention to the work of Malek Mohammad Salman, where he notes that the framework of the novel is the historic transition of British society from the 1930s' "Depression" to the 1950s' "Affluence". Therefore, comparing Dufton and Warley, the author of the novel creates a literary contrast between two "worlds" – the images of Great Britain of the 1930s and the 1950s. The towns described, in their turn, represent different values. Thus, the image of Dufton associates with poverty and humanism, and that of Warley – with prosperity and materialism: "There is a constantly recurring structuring of Dufton and Warley and presentation of the different values they embody. The word "world" is used to indicate a general atmosphere of a particular lifestyle. Two "worlds" are set against each other with the different concepts they evoke; Dufton, poor and humanistic, and Warley, rich and materialistic" (1990, 309).

Describing Dufton as a "dead" town, the author uses a significant amount of lexemes with a negative connotation (e. g. dead, hate, awful, stinks, oiled, immobile, dirtied), adverts

to metaphors (bread – sawdust, people – zombies, people – adding-machines), as well as to such stylistic devices as alliteration, detachment, repetition, polysyndeton, and irony. Using the aforementioned stylistic devices, John Braine creates the negative image of the town exactly as Joe Lampton sees it.

Warley is the exact opposite of Dufton as there are rich mansions, people of a kind he had never mixed with before, and the feeling of confidence in a decent future – all these inspire the hero, inducing him to move on along the chosen way. Aiming to create a contrast image of Warley, the author widely uses lexemes with a positive connotation (e.g. alive, lived, happy, love, home, large, soft), introduces into the text a symbol of a dignified and prosperous life, from the hero's perspective, adverts to graphic means of expression, antonyms, contextual synonyms, repetition, polysemantic vocabulary, and syntactic means, such as asyndeton and antithesis.

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