



A Room with a View

Edward Morgan Forster
(1908)

PLOT AND SETTING

The first part of this romantic comedy takes place in Italy and opens in a pensione for English tourists in **Florence** with a confrontation between Lucy Honeychurch's chaperone Miss Bartlett, and Mr Emerson and his son George. The two men offer to exchange rooms, in order to give the ladies the chance to have a view on the Arno, a favour which they reluctantly accept. The novel describes the other **English tourists at the Pensione Bertolini**: the clergyman Mr Beebe and the novelist Miss Lavish. Lucy, a middle-class, sensitive and artistic girl, goes through several experiences that will change her: she witnesses a street murder and is kissed by George Emerson during an outing to Fiesole. The second part of the novel is set in **Surrey, England**, where **Lucy becomes engaged to the aristocratic and conventional Cecil Vyse**. The Emersons rent a villa in the neighbourhood and Lucy begins to realise that she loves George, but it takes her some time to extricate herself from what she calls 'the muddle'. **The novel ends in the Pensione Bertolini, with George and Lucy on their honeymoon**. Without her mother's consent, Lucy has eloped with George. There is tension with her family, but also hope that things will get better.

CHARACTERS

Lucy Honeychurch is an English girl who is trying to understand what she wants from life. In the course of the novel she develops into an **independent passionate young woman** choosing the man she really loves instead of marrying into upper class society.

George Emerson is a young middle-class man who finds life worth living when he meets Lucy in Florence. He encourages her to follow her desires instead of marrying her pretentious fiancé, **Cecil Vyse**, who belongs to the affluent and sophisticated London society.

THE BRITISH AND ITALY

It was common for middle-class British travellers to take the '**Grand Tour**' of Italy to see the works of Renaissance and Roman artists. However, these tourists often had a superficial experience of Italy, mainly because they stayed with other British travellers, and visited museums and churches with their English guidebooks, the Baedekers. Forster criticised this kind of tourist, but with humour, so his novel is a **social commentary** which laughs at its subjects. Through Lucy's experiences in Florence, Forster's version of the Grand Tour becomes an opportunity for experiencing entirely new dimensions and categories. Italy functions as an occasion for getting beyond 'the muddle' of **English social convention and traditional cultural values**. It is a place for identifying what 'to live' might really mean.

STYLE

A Room with a View is several novels in one – social comedy, mythic romance, novel of ideas, shifting in mode from realism to romance to polemic, at once light and dark, celebratory and melancholy. It is built upon linked **antitheses** – room/views, inside/outside, medieval/classical, lies/truth, earth/sky, blood/water. Painting, architecture, sculpture, and music offer parallels for characters, settings and arguments. It is the only one of Forster's novels to have chapter titles which contribute to the overall comic effect. The narrator is an observer who sets the scene, sometimes commenting on what the characters do and say. However, he is often very close to their point of view. Other characters often speak alongside the narrator: Mr Beebe and Mr Emerson bring about crucial events in the novel and carry its underlying polemic, and Cecil, in Part 2, in his double role of Lucy's suitor and comic muse, controls much of the plot, functioning as its commentator.

Key idea

The muddle

The remains of Victorian sensibility are still present in the novel: the characters are much concerned with propriety and refinement, the virtue of young girls and the control of passions. But the novel also witnesses a time of change, especially for women who were beginning to claim equal rights. Socialists, represented by the Emersons, were challenging old ideas about class, religion, emotion and sexuality. Through Lucy's growth toward self-awareness,

Forster gives an insight on the subject of repressed passion, and the war between desire and society's conventions. He uses the word 'muddle' to describe Lucy's state of mind. The muddle is linked with growing up, it is frightening and confusing, but in passing through it Lucy becomes a stronger and wiser person. Lucy's anguish in choosing between George and Cecil becomes a contest of modernity against convention, honesty against hypocrisy, clarity against muddle.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the texts and answer the following questions.

- 1 Where is the story set?
- 2 What kind of character is Lucy?
- 3 Why did Forster choose Italy as the setting to the novel?
- 4 What kind of novel is *A Room with a View*?
- 5 What narrative technique did Forster use?
- 6 What codes of morality and behaviour do the different characters represent?
- 7 Why does the word 'muddle' recur many times in the novel?

**Things unladylike**

After playing the piano at the Pensione Bertolini, Lucy feels bored by the conversation with the other guests and decides to go out alone hoping to experience some adventure.

Why were most big things unladylike? Charlotte had once explained to her why. It was not that ladies were inferior to men; it was that they were different. Their mission was to inspire others to **achievement** rather than to achieve themselves. Indirectly, by means of tact and a **spotless** name, a lady could accomplish¹ much. But if she rushed into the
 5 fray herself² she would be first censured, then despised³, and finally ignored. Poems had been written to illustrate this point.

[...]

Lucy does not stand for the medieval lady, who was rather an ideal to which she was bidden to lift⁴ her eyes when feeling serious. Nor has she any system of revolt.
 10 Here and there a restriction annoyed her particularly, and she would transgress it, and perhaps be sorry that she had done so. This afternoon she was peculiarly **restive**. She would really like to do something of which her well-wishers⁵ disapproved. As she might not go on the electric tram, she went to Alinari's shop.

There she bought a photograph of Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus.' Venus, being a pity,
 15 spoilt the picture, otherwise so charming, and Miss Bartlett had persuaded her to do without it. (A pity in art of course signified the nude.) [...]

'Nothing ever happens to me,' she reflected, as she entered the Piazza Signoria and looked nonchalantly at its marvels, now fairly familiar to her. The great square was in shadow; the sunshine had come too late to strike it. Neptune was already unsubstantial
 20 in the twilight⁶, half god, half ghost, and his fountain plashed⁷ dreamily to the men and satyrs who idled together on its marge⁸. The Loggia showed as the triple entrance of a cave, wherein dwelt many a deity, shadowy, but immortal, looking forth upon the arrivals and departures of mankind. It was the hour of unreality – the hour, that is, when unfamiliar things are real. An older person at such an hour and in such a place
 25 might think that sufficient was happening to him, and rest content. Lucy desired more.

[...]

Then something did happen.

Two Italians by the Loggia had been **bickering** about a debt. 'Cinque lire,' they had cried, 'cinque lire!' They sparred at each other⁹, and one of them was hit lightly upon
 30 the chest. He **frowned**; he bent towards Lucy with a look of interest, as if he had an important message for her. He opened his lips to deliver it, and a stream of red came out between them and trickled down his unshaven chin¹⁰.

That was all. A crowd rose out of the **dusk**. It hid this extraordinary man from her, and bore him away to the fountain. Mr George Emerson happened to be a few paces
 35 away, looking at her across the spot where the man had been. How very **odd**! Across something. Even as she caught sight of him he **grew dim**; the palace itself grew dim, swayed¹¹ above her, fell on to her softly, slowly, noiselessly, and the sky fell with it.

Edward Morgan Forster
A Room with a View
 (1908)

Part 1, Chapter 4

- 1 **accomplish**. Ottenere, conseguire.
- 2 **she rushed into the fray herself**. Lei stessa si fosse gettata nella mischia.
- 3 **despised**. Disprezzata.
- 4 **she was bidden to lift**. Le era stato ordinato di alzare.
- 5 **her well-wishers**. Le persone che le erano affezionate.
- 6 **unsubstantial in the twilight**. Inconsistente nel crepuscolo.
- 7 **plashed**. Spruzzava.
- 8 **idled together on its marge**. Oziavano insieme sul suo margine.
- 9 **They sparred at each other**. Si azzuffarono.
- 10 **trickled down his unshaven chin**. Gocciolò giù dal mento non rasato.
- 11 **swayed**. Oscillò.



She thought: 'Oh, what have I done?'

'Oh, what have I done?' she murmured, and opened her eyes.

40 George Emerson still looked at her, but not across anything. She had complained of dullness, and lo! one man was stabbed¹², and another held her in his arms.

They were sitting on some steps in the Uffizi Arcade. He must have carried her. He rose when she spoke, and began to dust his knees. She repeated:

'Oh, what have I done?'

45 'You fainted.'

'I – I am very sorry.'

'How are you now?'

'Perfectly well – absolutely well.' And she began to nod and smile.

'Then let us come home. There's no point in our stopping.'

50 He held out his hand to pull her up. She pretended not to see it. The cries from the fountain – they had never ceased – rang emptily. The whole world seemed pale and void of its original meaning.

'How very kind you have been! I might have hurt myself falling. But now I am well. I can go alone, thank you.'

55 His hand was still extended.

'Oh, my photographs!' she exclaimed suddenly.

'What photographs?'

'I bought some photographs at Alinari's. I must have dropped them out there in the square.' She looked at him cautiously. 'Would you add to your kindness by fetching them¹³?' 60

He added to his kindness. As soon as he had turned his back, Lucy arose with the running of a maniac and stole¹⁴ down the arcade towards the Arno.

'Miss Honeychurch!'

She stopped with her hand on her heart.

65 'You sit still; you aren't fit to go home alone.'

'Yes, I am, thank you so very much.'

'No, you aren't. You'd go openly if you were.'

'But I had rather –'

'Then I don't fetch your photographs.'

70 'I had rather be alone.'

He said imperiously: 'The man is dead – the man is probably dead; sit down till you are rested.' She was bewildered, and obeyed him. 'And don't move till I come back.'

[...]

He had thrown something into the stream.

75 'What did you throw in?'

'Things I didn't want,' he said crossly¹⁵.

'Mr Emerson!'

'Well?'

'Where are the photographs?'

80 He was silent.

'I believe it was my photographs that you threw away.'

'I didn't know what to do with them,' he cried, and his voice was that of an anxious boy. Her heart warmed towards him for the first time. 'They were covered with blood. There! I'm glad I've told you; and all the time we were making conversation I was

85 wondering what to do with them.' He pointed downstream. 'They've gone.' The river swirled¹⁶ under the bridge, 'I did mind them so, and one is so foolish, it seemed better that they should go out to the sea – I don't know; I may just mean that they frightened me.' Then the boy verged into¹⁷ a man. 'For something tremendous has happened; I must face it without getting muddled¹⁸. It isn't exactly that a man has died.'

90 Something warned Lucy that she must stop him.

'It has happened,' he repeated, 'and I mean to find out what it is.'

12 stabbed. Pugnalo.

13 by fetching them. Andandole a prendere.

14 stole. Se ne andò furtivamente.

15 crossly. Bruscamente.

16 swirled. Turbinava.

17 verged into. Diventò.

18 face it without getting muddled. Affrontarlo senza confondermi.



'Mr Emerson –'

He turned towards her frowning, as if she had disturbed him in some abstract quest.

'I want to ask you something before we go in.'

95 They were close to their pension. She stopped and leant her elbows¹⁹ against the parapet of the embankment. He did likewise²⁰. There is at times a magic in identity of position; it is one of the things that have suggested to us eternal comradeship. She moved her elbows before saying:

'I have behaved ridiculously.'

100 He was following his own thoughts.

'I was never so much ashamed of myself in my life; I cannot think what came over me.'

'I nearly fainted myself,' he said; but she felt that her attitude repelled him.

'Well, I owe you a thousand apologies²¹.'

'Oh, all right.'

105 'And – this is the real point – you know how silly people are gossiping²² – ladies especially, I am afraid – you understand what I mean?'

'I'm afraid I don't.'

'I mean, would you not mention it to any one, my foolish behaviour?'

'Your behaviour? Oh, yes, all right – all right.'

110 'Thank you so much. And would you –'

She could not carry her request any further. The river was rushing below them, almost black in the advancing night. He had thrown her photographs into it, and then he had told her the reason. It struck her that it was hopeless to look for chivalry in such a man. He would do her no harm by idle gossip²³; he was trustworthy²⁴, intelligent, and even kind; he might even have a high opinion of her. But he lacked chivalry; his
115 thoughts, like his behaviour, would not be modified by awe²⁵. It was useless to say to him, 'And would you –' and hope that he would complete the sentence for himself, averting his eyes from her nakedness like the knight in that beautiful picture²⁶. She had been in his arms, and he remembered it, just as he remembered the blood on
120 the photographs that she had bought in Alinari's shop. It was not exactly that a man had died; something had happened to the living: they had come to a situation where character tells, and where childhood enters upon the branching paths of Youth²⁷.

'Well, thank you so much,' she repeated, 'How quickly these accidents do happen, and then one returns to the old life!'

125 'I don't.'

Anxiety moved her to question him.

His answer was puzzling²⁸: 'I shall probably want to live.'

'But why, Mr Emerson? What do you mean?'

'I shall want to live, I say.'

130 Leaning her elbows on the parapet, she contemplated the River Arno, whose roar was suggesting some unexpected melody to her ears.

19 leant her elbows. Appoggiò i gomiti.

20 likewise. Lo stesso.

21 apologies. Scuse.

22 silly people are gossiping. Le persone sciocche spettegolano.

23 he would do her no harm by idle gossip. Non l'avrebbe danneggiata con chiacchiere futili.

24 trustworthy. Affidabile.

25 awe. Soggezione.

26 averting ... picture. Distogliendo lo sguardo dalla sua nudità come il cavaliere in quel bel quadro (si riferisce al dipinto del preraffaellita Sir John Everett Millais, *The Knight Errant*, 1870, Tate Gallery, London → Route 9).

27 the branching paths of Youth. I sentieri ramificati della Giovinezza.

28 puzzling. Sconcertante.

**READING COMPETENCE****1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.**

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1 faded | 7 search |
| 2 quarrelling | 8 restless |
| 3 stopped | 9 confused |
| 4 twilight | 10 contracted his brows in displeasure |
| 5 success, conquest | 11 strange |
| 6 boredom | 12 immaculately clean |

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.**1** Consider lines 1-60 and find out

- what Charlotte thought about women;
- whether Lucy stood for the medieval woman;
- what she bought and why;
- what she looked forward to;
- what happened in the Piazza Signoria;
- how she reacted and who rescued her;
- what she worried about.

2 Focus on the remaining lines and say whether these statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.

- George did not let Lucy go home alone.
- He gave her the photographs.
- George was not impressed at all by what had happened.
- Lucy felt perfectly at ease.
- She asked George not to tell anyone about what had happened.
- She was not sure she could trust him.
- She thought they could go back to their usual life and George agreed with her.

3 In paragraph one Forster uses

- free indirect speech.
- free direct speech.
- interior monologue.

Whose point of view is conveyed?

4 What changes in paragraph two as regards the narration and the use of tenses?**5** Explain the meaning of lines 18-25.**6** What cinematic technique does Forster use to describe the murder?

- Extreme close-up.
- Panoramic view.
- Slow motion.

Why does he use it?

7 Complete the table focusing on the two characters of Lucy and George from line 33.

	Lucy	George
Actions		
Reactions and attitude		
Way of speaking		



- 8 How does the murder affect the two characters?
- 9 Identify the object which represents a catalyst for change for both characters.
- 10 Write down the antitheses in the text.
- 11 Explain the symbolism of water at the end of the text.
- 12 What two different views of Italy are presented in the text?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT**

3 DISCUSS. How is the theme of women's position in society presented in the text?

4 EXPLAIN whether this text can be regarded as modernist or traditional.

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

5 DISCUSS. Is there an event in your life which marked the passage from the world of childhood to that of youth? Discuss with the rest of the class.