

# A Room with a View

E.M. Forster (1908)

*A Room with a View* was published in 1908 and is set in Italy and Edwardian era England. Forster was inspired to write this novel after staying at a guesthouse while travelling in Italy.

**Plot** The novel begins in Italy, where Lucy Honeychurch, a young upper-middle class woman, and her older chaperone Charlotte Bartlett are in a guesthouse in Florence complaining that their room does not have a view. The Emersons, an unconventional lower-class father and his free-spirited son, offer to swap rooms as they have a wonderful view. Although initially refusing the offer, Charlotte eventually accepts after being convinced by the clergyman Mr Beebe that the Emersons are perfectly decent. Later one day when Lucy is out alone in Florence, she is rescued by George Emerson when she faints after witnessing a murder in a square. The two young people form an attachment, and on a later excursion to the countryside George kisses Lucy. Charlotte decides to take Lucy to Rome away from George, as she does not consider him an appropriate suitor. There, Lucy spends time with an old acquaintance Cecil Vyse, an upper-class sophisticated but rather pretentious young man. Upon her return to Surrey, England, Lucy accepts a proposal of marriage from Cecil. The Emersons move into a cottage near Lucy's home. George is invited by Lucy's brother Freddy to the Honeychurch's house for a game of tennis and kisses Lucy again. He tells her that Cecil does not love Lucy for herself, but because he considers her an object. Eventually after telling

many lies, both to herself and others, Lucy breaks off her engagement with Cecil and elopes with George. They return to Florence together and stay at the same guesthouse in the room with a view.

**Themes** *A Room with a View* is a **romance novel** whose romantic plot centres on Lucy's decision between George and Cecil.

The main theme is **the conflict between social convention and passion**. Lucy's relationship with George is not acceptable socially because George is of a lower social class, whereas Cecil would be a more conventional choice for Lucy, but would make her unhappy. Lucy has been brought up in a society where women should repress their passions and follow convention.

**Women and femininity** is also a central theme; a woman was expected to look and behave in a certain way in Edwardian society.

The theme of **passion and nature** is also present. The weather in the novel often reflects the emotions of the characters.

**Style** The narrative style Forster uses is **simple and conversational**, dotted with **lyrical passages** to describe moments of passion or descriptions of nature. He does not experiment with new forms of writing. An **omniscient narrator** provides further insight by addressing the reader and seeing directly into the characters' thoughts. Often the narrator shows the reader truths that the characters cannot see themselves, for example that Lucy loves George.

## » Rounding it up

### 1. Answer the questions.

- a. Where is the novel set?
- b. Who are the main characters?
- c. What happens to Lucy in a square in Florence?
- d. How does the novel end?
- e. What are the three main themes?
- f. What kind of narrator does the novel have?

# Cecil's proposal

E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908)

■ This extract describes the circumstances of Cecil Vyse's proposal of marriage to Lucy Honeychurch and her acceptance.

5 **A**ppearing thus late in the story, Cecil must be at once described. He was medieval. Like a Gothic statue. Tall and refined, with shoulders that seemed braced square<sup>1</sup> by an effort of the will, and a head that was tilted<sup>2</sup> a little higher than the usual level of vision, he resembled those fastidious saints who guard the portals of a French cathedral. Well educated, well endowed<sup>3</sup>, and not deficient physically, he remained in the grip of<sup>4</sup> a certain devil whom the modern world knows as self-consciousness<sup>5</sup>, and whom the medieval, with dimmer<sup>6</sup> vision, worshipped as asceticism. A Gothic statue implies celibacy, just as a Greek statue implies fruition, and perhaps this was what Mr Beebe meant. And Freddy, who ignored history and art, perhaps meant the same when he failed to imagine Cecil wearing another fellow's cap<sup>7</sup>.

Mrs Honeychurch left her letter on the writing table and moved towards her young acquaintance.

"Oh, Cecil!" she exclaimed – "oh, Cecil, do tell me!"

"I promessi sposi," said he.

15 They stared at him anxiously.

"She has accepted me," he said, and the sound of the thing in English made him flush and smile with pleasure, and look more human.

20 "I am so glad," said Mrs Honeychurch, while Freddy proffered a hand that was yellow with chemicals. They wished that they also knew Italian, for our phrases of approval and of amazement are so connected with little occasions that we fear to use them on great ones. We are obliged to become vaguely poetic, or to take refuge<sup>8</sup> in Scriptural reminiscences.

25 "Welcome as one of the family!" said Mrs Honeychurch, waving her hand at the furniture. "This is indeed a joyous day! I feel sure that you will make our dear Lucy happy."

"I hope so," replied the young man, shifting<sup>9</sup> his eyes to the ceiling.

"We mothers –" simpered<sup>10</sup> Mrs Honeychurch, and then realized that she was affected, sentimental, bombastic<sup>11</sup> – all the things she hated most. Why could she not be Freddy, who stood stiff<sup>12</sup> in the middle of the room; looking very cross and almost handsome?

30 "I say, Lucy!" called Cecil, for conversation seemed to flag<sup>13</sup>.

Lucy rose from the seat. She moved across the lawn and smiled in at them, just as if she was going to ask them to play tennis. Then she saw her brother's face. Her lips parted, and she took him in her arms. He said, "Steady on!"

"Not a kiss for me?" asked her mother.

35 Lucy kissed her also.

"Would you take them into the garden and tell Mrs Honeychurch all about it?" Cecil suggested. "And I'd stop here and tell my mother."

"We go with Lucy?" said Freddy, as if taking orders.

"Yes, you go with Lucy."

40 They passed into the sunlight. Cecil watched them cross the terrace, and descend out of sight by the steps. They would descend – he knew their ways<sup>14</sup> – past the shrubbery<sup>15</sup>, and past the tennis-lawn and the dahlia-bed<sup>16</sup>, until they reached the kitchen garden, and there, in the presence of the potatoes and the peas, the great event would be discussed.

1. **braced square:** rafforzate

2. **tilted:** inclinata

3. **well endowed:** ben dotato

4. **in the grip of:** nel potere di

5. **self-consciousness:** autocoscienza

6. **dimmer:** meno potente

7. **wearing another fellow's cap:**

diverso da com'era

8. **take refuge:** rifugiarsi

9. **shifted:** spostando

10. **simpered:** disse con affettazione

11. **bombastic:** magniloquente

12. **stiff:** rigido

13. **flag:** affievolirsi

14. **ways:** abitudini

15. **shrubbery:** arbusti

16. **dahlia-bed:** le aiuole di dalie

45 Smiling indulgently, he lit a cigarette, and rehearsed<sup>17</sup> the events that had led to such a happy conclusion.

He had known Lucy for several years, but only as a commonplace<sup>18</sup> girl who happened to be musical. He could still remember his depression that afternoon at Rome, when she and her terrible cousin fell on him out of the blue, and demanded to be taken to St. Peter's. That day she had seemed a typical tourist – shrill, crude, and gaunt with travel<sup>19</sup>. But Italy worked some marvel in her. It gave her light, and – which he held more precious – it gave her shadow<sup>20</sup>. Soon he detected in her a wonderful reticence. She was like a woman of Leonardo da Vinci's, whom we love not so much for herself as for the things that she will not tell us. The things are assuredly not of this life; no woman of Leonardo's could have anything so vulgar as a "story." She did develop most wonderfully day by day.

So it happened that from patronizing civility he had slowly passed if not to passion, at least to a profound uneasiness<sup>21</sup>. Already at Rome he had hinted to her that they might be suitable for each other. It had touched him greatly that she had not broken away<sup>22</sup> at the suggestion. Her refusal had been clear and gentle; after it – as the horrid<sup>23</sup> phrase went – she had been exactly the same to him as before. Three months later, on the margin of Italy, among the flower-clad<sup>24</sup> Alps, he had asked her again in bald<sup>25</sup>, traditional language. She reminded him of a Leonardo more than ever; her sunburnt features were shadowed by fantastic rock; at his words she had turned and stood between him and the light with immeasurable plains behind her. He walked home with her unashamed, feeling not at all like a rejected suitor. The things that really mattered were unshaken.

So now he had asked her once more, and, clear and gentle as ever, she had accepted him, giving no coy<sup>26</sup> reasons for her delay, but simply saying that she loved him and would do her best to make him happy. His mother, too, would be pleased; she had counselled<sup>27</sup> the step; he must write her a long account.

17. **rehearsed:** rivisse

18. **commonplace:** banale

19. **shrill, crude, and gaunt with travel:** stridula, rozza e stanca del viaggio

20. **shadow:** ombra

21. **uneasiness:** disagio

22. **had not broken away:** non se ne fosse andata

23. **horrid:** orribile

24. **flower-clad:** coperte di fiori

25. **bald:** spoglio

26. **coy:** schiva

27. **had counselled:** aveva consigliato

## » Understanding the text

### 1. Answer the questions.

- Where does the scene take place?
- What is the reaction of Lucy's mother to Cecil's news?
- What was Cecil's first impression of Lucy in Rome?
- How many times has Cecil proposed to Lucy?
- What does Cecil like about Lucy?

## » Closer reading

### 2. Match the following words and expressions (a-e) to their Italian equivalents (1-5).

- |                            |                       |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| a. worshipped (l. 7)       | 1. accennato          |
| b. cross (l. 29)           | 2. di punto in bianco |
| c. Steady on! (l. 33)      | 3. adorato            |
| d. out of the blue (l. 49) | 4. arrabbiato         |
| e. hinted (l. 57)          | 5. Calmati!           |

### 3. What is suggested about Cecil's character by the following sentence?

"...and a head that was tilted a little higher than the usual level of vision..."

### 4. What is the purpose of the narrator's description of Cecil at the beginning of the extract?

### 5. What is Freddy's reaction to the news? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

### 6. Describe the dramatic effect of the following lines:

"She moved across the lawn and smiled in at them, just as if she was going to ask them to play tennis. Then she saw her brother's face. Her lips parted, and she took him in her arms."

### 7. What do the following lines tell the reader about Cecil's love for Lucy?

"She was like a woman of Leonardo da Vinci's, whom we love not so much for herself as for the things that she will not tell us. The things are assuredly not of this life; no woman of Leonardo's could have anything so vulgar as a "story."

## » Rounding it up

### 8. **FIRST** Complete the text using one word for each gap.

[1] ..... George first kisses Lucy  
[2] ..... Italy she follows her cousin  
Charlotte's advice, and promises not to tell  
anyone [3] ..... it. In England, she  
gets engaged [4] ..... Cecil, and convinces  
herself that she loves [5] .....,  
denying her true feelings for George. George  
kisses her a second time in the garden at  
her home, and Lucy is furious. When she  
[6] ..... him to leave, George says  
that Cecil does not respect her but only wants  
to own her [7] ..... if she were object,

and not long after Lucy calls [8] .....  
her engagement. [9] ....., Lucy still  
does not admit that she loves George. She wants  
to run [10] ..... to Greece to escape  
her true feelings – until Mr Emerson, George's  
father, convinces her to be honest with herself.  
In the [11] ..... Lucy becomes  
[12] ..... independent and assertive,  
and disregards both her own family and social  
expectations when she finally marries George and  
elopes with him to Italy.

## » Over to you

### 9. Use the opening paragraph to write a description of Cecil in your own words.