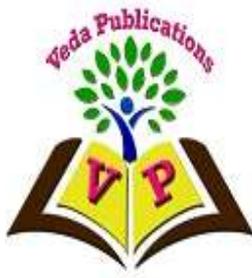




JOHN WAIN'S *STRIKE THE FATHER DEAD*: A JOURNEY FROM REVOLT TO ACCEPTANCE

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ABSTRACT

John Wain was an English poet, Novelist, Dramatist, Literary Critic and journalist and also termed as "*Angry young man*" of the 1950's. The 1950's are known in English literature as a period of rebellion, anger and protest. A large number of British authors, who belong to this age, are loosely classified as the "*Angries or Angry Young Men*" and the phrase Angry Young men had first appeared in English as the title of *Leslie Allen Paul's* autobiography *Angry Young man* (1951). The main writers associated with this group are John Wain, William Cooper, Colin Wilson, John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Braine and Allan Sillitoe etc. The writers find British society divided into watertight compartment- the proletariat, the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats. So they opposed the British establishment and conservative elements of society. The British writers showed unusual interest in the working class life providing ample subject matter for all literary genres like poetry, short-stories, novels and plays. The novel is a genre of literature that deals with human beings, their relationship with each other, their joys and sorrows, struggles, success and failures. The novelist presents a picture of life in the garb of entertainment. So the novel not only pleases the reader but it also sets him think on certain problems of life. Thus the central concern of Wain's novels focuses around common experiences of life, birth, death, love-making, working, getting on with people, struggling etc.

Keywords: *Life, Relationship, Birth, Death, Love-Making etc.*



In the novels of John Wain, the protagonists have their roots to lower middle class, but being well-educated and sure of their abilities they have ambition to climb up in social order and being accepted as equal in sophisticated upper class. In spite of their inherent qualities they are treated as "outsiders" by the well-entrenched privileged groups and there by begin their tales of anger and revolt or protest.

The dilemma of the middle class young man endeavouring to identify himself with the higher class has provided motivations to contemporary novelists like *Allan Sillitoe, John Braine and John Wain* etc.

Besides the identity crisis and the problem of survival, writers have come across another situation which arises due to modernization—that of conflict of generations. Parents have a rigid, unchanging attitude whereas the children have a flexible attitude towards life.

Wain began writing at a time when European life was badly shattered by the after effects of the Second World War. Wain used his work as a medium of protest against the political opportunists, social hypocrites and rising decadence in religious life. Wain has presented a realistic picture of contemporary society. As the characters deal with life first hand. The characters in his novels do leave the class or home for several reasons as they desire to extend their boundaries or they have resentment against some narrow conventions but they have a strong hold on human values. Those characters who move away from the whole group gradually feel the loss. Either they try to re-establish links or continue to suffer from a sense of loss and feel its absence. Such characters show most of the signs of isolation and loneliness. They feel angry and frustrated and often resort to hard drinking and womanizing. "*Hurry on Down*" (1953) is a picaresque novel of Wain. It is a story of an unsettled university graduate *Charles Lumley*, who opposes the standards of the conventional society.

John Wain's fifth novel, "*Strike the Father Dead*" underlines the conflict between the generations and distressing situations arising out of it. The Protagonist, *Jeremy* (a jazz-pianist) gets disappointed with his father – a professor of Greek in the ivory tower of an English University – who does

not support him. This creates a gulf in their relation. Thus this gulf creates a story of son's rebellion against the moral values and disciplined life of his father, but at the end of the novel their reconciliation in near future is hinted at.

As a novelist *John Wain* intended to explore a wider expanse of life and consequently in his work there is an incessant struggle to bring new vistas of life in his imaginative range. Keeping this view in mind "*Strike the Father Dead*" is a step forward in Wain's evolution as a novelist.

The plot structure is different from his other novels. There is a seven part time scheme. Part one and Part six are placed in 1957 or early 1958; in Part Two the hero is placed in the pre-war years; while the other divisions follow chronologically upto 1958. The scene of the novel moves from between a provincial university town and the black market and jazz side of London, with a trip to Paris as well. In this novel, Wain throws light on the life of a son who revolts against his father. The hero, *Jeremy Coleman* has constant feeling of disappointment and insurrection against the self-disciplined and austere life style of his father.

There are four main characters in this novel. *Jeremy Coleman* is the central character who rebels against his father and the academic environment in which he is placed, only to pursue his interest in jazz. *Alfred Coleman*, the father of *Jeremy* is the second character. He is an atheist believing more in hard work and duty. By profession he is a professor of classics. *Eleanor*, Alfred's sister is also foster mother to *Jeremy* and is the third character in the novel. *Percy Brett*, a black American jazz musician is the next important character. He guides *Jeremy* in his pursuit of music.

In *strike the Father Dead*, we find that Wain's approach is realistic and pragmatic. Like *Doris Lessing*, Wain's novels also take up some burning issues such as the generation gap, the sexual maladjustment and struggle of the members in search of individual dignity and happiness in life. In this novel, *Jeremy* feels depressed and annoyed with the compulsion of learning Greek grammar. Not he but only his father wants him to learn Greek and *Jeremy* finds it difficult to live under the subordination of his father so he runs away from



home in search of freedom – freedom from repression and bondage. His words reflect the bitterness;

The endless round of duties and responsibilities that has been palmed off on me as a life – It wasn't a life. It was a fraud and knew it. And if they did not know it, so much the worse for them. They meant everyone, including the old man Alfred or rather especially him. Out of my way! I thought I've struck off the chains and I'm heading for open country. An escaped slave, perfectly willing to cut down everyone who stands in front of him. This was not time for evasions¹.

Thus Wain tries to focus on the psychological state of an adolescent through *Jeremy*. Wain confines himself to search for a solution within the frame work of existing human and societal relationships. As his hero Jeremy believes that *"It was the only way I could combine duty with pleasure ----- It's the only kind of music in which the individuality of the performer is everything"*²

Jeremy has bohemian aspect of life. So as a young man, he can not tolerate his father any more because he feels to be bounded in the company of his duty oriented father. As the novel opens Jeremy is seen playing music at a London bar. The scene is placed several years after the World War II. A reporter from a London scandal news paper discovers that Jeremy is the son of a professor. Both *Alfred and Eleanor* are ashamed of the life that Jeremy has opted for; but they do not condemn him. Alfred Coleman has a pathetic tone here-

*"I must know where I stand and I know beyond any shadow of doubt, how I'm regarded by my colleagues and for that matter by my student. I'm that traditionally pathetic figure, the father rejected by his own son----- I'm the professor of classics whose son went to bad"*³.

One day Jeremy falls of his bicycle which he is riding and at the same time trying to read *"Greek grammar spreads out on the handlebars"*⁴ Jeremy is a sensitive young boy and tries to do his best to please his duty oriented father but his father doesn't get contentment with the work of him (Jeremy).

Consequently a feeling of revolt against his father takes birth in the heart of Jeremy. Unwillingly he tries to learn Greek grammar just to please his father but fails to satisfy him as his own worlds reflects him mental botheration.

*"I took it home and got really stuck in. For about the first twelve day of the holiday. I ate, drank, slept and breathed Greek grammar. My only ambition was to print that evil little book on my brain, indelibly. Then I should know all the answers about Greek grammar. -----Then I should be loved, admired, accepted and tolerated, by everyone in my world. Especially my father. Because of course, from his point of views, a son who really knew every page of the Greek grammar was a son to be proud of, one who had the right stuff in him. The right stuff, in this case, being Greek grammar"*⁵.

So Jeremy feels *"more resentment, really, about the whole ugly business"*⁶. As he declares that he is just only a teenager who is, *"just emerging into life and becoming aware of all it possibilities"*⁷. Thus Jeremy wants to enjoy life in his own manner. There should not be any type of compulsion because it hinders the natural development of a youth like him. We can notice, that Wain emphasizes the value of the individual through the character of Jeremy, the protagonist in *Strike the Father Dead*.

One day his Grammar book lands in a fish pond. Jeremy quickly gives a symbolic interpretation to this incident and feels that the lost book, is a symbolic revolt against his father Alfred's Philosophy – *"there was murder in my heart. Not murder of a person, but of a way of life. I just didn't want any more of it"*⁸.

Then Jeremy runs away from home at the end of his school term. He first spends sometime on a farm and then he flees to London. There he leads a Bohemian carefree life. He meets *Diana*, a local prostitute who helps him to see the seamy side of life and *Tim* who is a London draft- dodger. Tim provides false identity to Jeremy there by enabling him to avoid the draft. Jeremy has seen enough of life outside. Now he craves for some kind of guidance and leadership, perhaps the kind he got from his father. He is fortunate to meet *Percy Brett* who



becomes his foster father. One day Jeremy is playing the piano in a public dance hall, there Jeremy meets *Lucille*, a prostitute who opens a new world to him.....the world of saloons, with their drunken cheapness, roughness and squalor. Jeremy had never had this kind of experience before. he had never kissed a girl before. With *Lucille*, he feels more like a man, he had shed off his boyishness. The encounter with *Lucille* leaves a mixed impact on *Jeremy*.

The next day Jeremy suffers from a sense of guilt, disgust and self-condemnation. He realizes that sin he has committed and makes all possible efforts to regain his purity. Very pathetically he says :

*"It was because I, with my youthful body, unlined face, clear eyes, had put myself voluntarily on the same level as raddled, ruined Lucille, I had felt lust for that disgusting body, and had given way to that lust."*⁹

For several days, Jeremy lives the life of penance. Wain writes that Jeremy lived :

*"In the world of prayer, self-discipline, and spiritual communion that the saints and mystics live in all that time"*¹⁰.

Guilt consciousness makes Jeremy's life hell. He struggles to get out of it as soon as possible. Jeremy's penance is rewarded and one fine day he does get out of this feeling of self-disgust.

During a cricket match, one day, Jeremy hears a dog's bark and sees a pretty girl simultaneously. This becomes the turning point in his life. The sight of the girl makes him think of physical beauty. Till now he had been haunted by unpleasant memories of *Lucille* but that day he is able to see a girl from an entirely different point of view. *Lucille* does not represent the reality of womanhood. The barking of the dog symbolizes life while the girl symbolizes beauty, Both these help him become enlightened :

*"And because I loved them, I had to love myself---The world was opening out before me, and it wasn't a world of punishment and penance, but of life---could find a place in my world for everything and everyone - yes, even for poor old Lucille"*¹¹.

From the experience of Jeremy, Wain points out at two different views of looking at women. One is the concept of purity, beauty and innocence which Jeremy sees in the pretty girl at the cricket match.

The other one is the idea of immorality and sexual abuse of a woman's body as indicated through the character of *Lucille*. Life consists of both, the good and the bad but it is upto men to choose the better of the two. *Dale Salwak*, too holds a similar view when he writes:

*From this experience, he realizes that London combines all facets of experience into a dynamic synthesis. He does not evade the violence, the evil, and the sinister; in confronting them honestly, he negates their influence in favour of the good, the beautiful and the true"*¹².

Jeremy learns a lot from his association with women. He becomes mature in his out look towards life. He is prepared now to take things in his stride.

Though in "*Strike the Father Dead*" John Wain concentrates on the problems of conflict between father (Alfred) and son (Jeremy). Yet it deals with the other aspects of Jeremy's life. Thus the diversity of the world that confronts man is further demonstrated in this novel. This is a story about *Jeremy Coleman*----a sensitive young man – who is confronted by external reality. Jeremy breaks away from his father-Alfred because he wants to become a jazz pianist. Alfred is a professor of classics and wants his son to become an academician instead of a musician. One of the great problems that struck the early twentieth century western society was the problem of generation gap. The parents tried to dominate the children and did not allow freedom even to choose their own course in life. Consequently, the younger generation revolted, severed all parental ties and wandered away from home in search of greener pastures. Jeremy does exactly the same.

On the other hand Wain shows the character of *Alfred Coleman* – He volunteered in the First World War. There he met *Major Edward* who was like foster father to Alfred. We are also told that Alfred did not agree with own father who was a Victorian clergy-man. Here Alfred clears his words: *My own father was given to seeing the slightest of his own whims as co-extensive with the ten Commandments, and it was his inability to see anyone else's points of view that finally led to an estrangement between us that darkened his later*



years and now, in recollection, darkens my middle age¹³.

Thus Alfred realizes that this estrangement between him and his own father is because of generation gap. As he (*Alfred*) also rebels against his father in his young life and he becomes an atheist, but gave great importance to duty and service as prime virtues in life. Wain draws a comparison between two generations and their attitude to the world wars. During the world war II Jeremy meets Percy Brett who is his personal advisor. But there is a great difference between Alfred and Major Edwards on one hand and Jeremy and Percy Brett on the other. Their attitude and experience are wide apart. However, Jeremy discovers that he is similar to his father in following his love for music, it is just as Alfred pursued classics. After the war Alfred and Jeremy come together and develop a more sympathetic attitude towards one another. Jeremy gains something by this father – son relationship and learns that happiness comes by.

*Hard work, the sense of difficulties overcome and a duty done. Rectitude, self-denial and a quite conscience.*¹⁴

This is truly an encounter with reality-to arrive at a truthful conclusion after much struggle.

Alfred does not give up; he does not allow his son to wander in the wilderness of city life. He makes repeated attempts to explain to Jeremy, what is right and what is wrong. He talks about the importance of tradition:

*At a foundation like ours, established in the nineteenth century with the object of bringing the light, or some of it, to the inhabitants of an industrial city, we are bound to remember that our particular traditions are those of austerity, industry and an honorable poverty.*¹⁵

We are told in the novel that Alfred was taught this by his father and he, in turn, thought it wise, to transfer it to his son, *Jeremy*.

John Wain, in true manner of a bildungsroman, traces the journey of Jeremy from a provincial town to London and simultaneously his evolution from youth to manhood. The novel reveals Jeremy's motives in life and why he revolted against his father. The theme readily justifies the title of the

novel. *Jeremy* was forever attempting to get away from the world of repression, represented by his father, Alfred. Jeremy's statement reveals how bitter he was against his father:

*I wanted, actually needed, to think of myself as a rebel, bravely acting out a pattern that was the reverse of what I had been taught, experimenting with an upside down and an inside-out system of values.*¹⁶

Jeremy wanted to get away from the strong influence of his father. He was actually trying to search an identity for himself. *Dale Salwak* looks at the life of *Jeremy* from a different point of view. He writes :

*"Hence, the theme of death and rebirth unfolds in a series of initiations. Jeremy is forever attempting to find a new life, a fresh start; through the course of his journey away from home he assumes a variety of roles. Eventually, under Percy's direction, Jeremy comes to use his hands, to love music even more deeply and therefore, to begin to realize his hidden identity. Percy's symbolic association with the father-figure, the ideal, the natural parent, is suggested throughout the story".*¹⁷

In an attempt to find a new life and an identity for himself, *Jeremy* sets out first to free himself from various bondages and ties such as family ties and the dominance of his father. But his experience in London and later in Paris reveal that his rebellion against his father was futile because the new life which *Jeremy* is leading leaves him an isolated person who has no roots or history or even memory. *Jeremy's* words are pathetic :

*I felt I'd like to be Jeremy, but I didn't know who Jeremy was or how he would act. All I could do was to get away from the things that have influenced me, as I had already got away from my father. It was all part of the search for an identity and a way of life.*¹⁸

The novel shows in every way the evolution of the protagonist. His experience in life helps him to come to terms with life. And there is self-realization as well but before that he had to suffer great boredom, frustration and sickening isolation.



Critics have termed this novel as a transitional novel because John Wain has successfully attempted to integrate plot, theme, setting and character. It is also in many ways one of his mature novels as the protagonist is no more passive but very assertive. *Wain's* approach to life becomes more serious. The characters no more protest but realize that they must adjust to society in which they have to survive. As the novel *Strike the Father Dead* ends- both the father (Alfred) and the son (Jeremy) realize that they need each other. As they compromise and arrive at the sympathetic understanding and mutual respect.

Dale Salwak writes – “Strike the Father Dead” is a commentary on contemporary life.

*We share his experience, his apprehension of life. And his narration develop some of Wain's major themes, including the preference of country over city, a respect for the dignity of man and affirmation of life.*¹⁹

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