The aim of the present paper is to seek out possible classic inspirations of John Braine’s first novel *Room at the Top* (1957), especially of its serious and tragic elements. The possible choice we intend to propose and analyse is the myth of the Argonauts, more specifically its final part, the story of Jason and Medea. However, the discussed novel, once a major bestseller which sold over a million copies in the United Kingdom in ten years and was outsold only by D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (Fjågesund 1999: 247), and which was made in 1959 into an equally successful movie, requires now some introduction just as does its author.

John Braine (1922-1986) was an English novelist, seen as a leading representative of the Angry Young Men period (Fordoński 1997: 44-55). Braine, whose great breakthrough came with his first novel, *Room at the Top*, was educated as a librarian and worked in this profession until he could make a living as a full-time writer. His second novel, *The Vodi* (1959), was only moderately successful and Braine returned to his favourite character, Joe Lampton, writing a sequel to his first novel, entitled *Life at the Top* (1962). He went on producing a book regularly every 18 months, writing eleven more novels, none of them, however, enjoyed popularity comparable with his literary debut. In the later period he also wrote screenplays for three more movies made of his novels, none of which, however, was as successful as that made of his first novel.

*Room at the Top* is set in the late 1940s in the North of England (the specific names of places are imaginary) and revolves around Joe Lampton, a young man whose ambition is to get to the top. He achieves this aim by

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84 It is probably enough to mention that the movie won two Academy Awards (the Best Actress in a Leading Role for Simone Signoret and Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium with four more nominations – Best Picture, Best Actor in Leading Role, Best Actress in a Supporting Role, and Best Director), Golden Globe, two BAFTA awards and an award at the Cannes film festival for Signoret.
mingling with the best society of Warley and ultimately manages to marry Susan Brown, the only daughter of a major local businessman. On his way to the top he is helped by Alice Aisgill, a married woman in her 30s with whom he has an affair. The affair ends rather ugly when Joe decides to marry Susan, who is pregnant by him, as the rejected Alice commits suicide. Joe achieves his aim but the costs he must pay are far higher than anything he ever expected. The story of Joe is consequently quite tragic even if the novel ends in the death of another character. It is quite obviously impossible to present Braine’s novel as a tragedy in the literary sense of the word. However, it doubtless involves a tragic element which is worth further analysis.

Amongst many various definitions of the concept of the tragedy and the tragic, certain elements seem to have been accepted beyond any doubt for centuries. To put things in a nutshell, a tragedy is originally a ancient literary genre which tells a sombre story, taken for example from classical Greek mythology, and ending in a catastrophe of the hero. According to Aristotle the aim of tragedy is to provide the audience with katharsis. Geoffrey Chaucer expressed the views of the ancient as follows:

Tragedy is to sayn a certain storie,
(As olde bookes maken us memorie),
Of him that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wretchedly (Chaucer 1996: 180).

Naturally, one may find the definition largely worthless if applied wholesale to Braine’s Room at the Top. Furthermore, even if we manage to disregard the fact that it is a modern novel and not a classical play, George Steiner has long decided that the tragedy ended as a genre in the 17th century (1961: 44). Braine’s novel certainly is not a tragedy either in classical or in modern sense. And yet it does possess certain tragic and serious qualities while approaching the novel in search for the sources of its tragic qualities may be quite a sensible task.

Inasmuch as we cannot alter the basic fact that Room at the Top is not a classical dramatic work, however, we may look for possible sources. The first choice would be, quite obviously, a collection of Greek myths. Here the obvious choice is Robert Graves’ The Greek Myths, first published in 1955, two years before the Braine’s novel. Naturally, it was hardly the first collection of the Greek myths available in Great Britain. The second choice are literary texts, taking a hint from Chaucer's quote "as olde books maken us memorie". The present paper is by no means the first such attempt, Peter Fjågesund has

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85 By the tragic element we understand further any such element of structure as setting as may result in a literary text achieving at least a part of the effect and dimension of a tragedy.

86 Henryk Zbierski noticed that „any definitions of tragedy and the tragic hardly ever submit to attempts aimed at finding universal definitions, applicable generally as well in time as in place”, (Zbierski 1966: 3).
quite successfully demonstrated certain similarities between Braine’s novel and Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Even though some of his arguments may be disputed and Braine’s own autobiographic writings do not support openly this (or any other) theory of possible influences, one fact remains – Braine was a fairly well educated man and during his almost fifteen-year long career as a librarian had both time and access to numerous books. The choice that we propose here, however, is to search for possible source among the classic works of literature, classical tragedies.

Our research may be carried out here in two different directions. The first way is to search through classical tragedies in order to find a possible source. This way may be troublesome. Even though the surviving material is limited in size as the vast majority of the ancient tragedies is lost to us and a great number exist only in fragments or abstracts, the number of those that remain is still impressive. However, the classical tragedies did seldom use new plots invented by their authors. Plagiarism seems to have been the only generally accepted method while the belief in an inherent value of the original creation is only an invention of the Romanticism.

In our search we may combine the two possibilities thus and seek first similar motives in the classical mythology and only then move on to such literary texts as made use of the myths we may find similar. The first step is to put the plot of *Room at the Top* in a nutshell in order to clarify the core of the story from any modern characteristics or additions. What we get is a story of a young man coming from outside in order to get to the higher strata of society to what he has got (or at least he thinks he does) the qualifications or rights. The young man falls in love with an older woman who helps him to reach his aim. The woman has to betray her duties and obligations by getting involved with the newcomer. However, the love disappears after a time, as the young man finds another, younger woman, consequently rejecting his original lover. The betrayed woman is driven to insanity and commits suicide while the man has to live with the burden of his sins.

A respected English language source on Greek mythology, *The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves, supplies a reader with a number of myths which show greater or smaller degree of similarity to the aforementioned summary of the plot. We can, for example, find some common points with the myth of Oedipus – a love affair between a young man and an older woman which ends in a suicide of the latter. However, the basic sense of the myth is totally different from what we find in *Room at the Top*.

What we are looking for is best found in another myth, the story of the Argonauts. What will concern us the most is the final part of the myth, the affair between Jason and Medea. The choice of the myth which will be further supported by a short comparison may become more understandable if we look at the number of literary works which were based on it. We may mention here: *Medea* by Euripides, *Medee* by Pierre Corneille, *Medea* by Franz Grillparzer, or *Medee* by Jean Anouilh, of course if we concentrate exclusively on
tragedies. Just the selection of titles proves that it was always the female character, Medea, that attracted attention of the playwrights.

The list of the similarities may start with Joseph/Jason. Both heroes are orphans, both have to fight for a place in the society and are forced to hide (at least to an extent) their origin. This happens for quite opposite reasons in the two discussed texts, Joe comes from much lower class than that he aspires to enter, Jason is a son of old king deprived of his throne. In order to accomplish their aim both heroes have to leave their native town and to undertake a journey. In the new place they uses the help of older women (Medea, Alice) which ends in a love affair. The love is dangerous for both of the women as Medea is as a priestess, "married" to Gods and betrays her father and brother, while Alice betrays George Aisgill to whom she is married. The love affair leads to a temporal union (Jason marries Medea, Joe and Alice can only afford a weekend outing together) and ends abruptly when both Jason and Joe fall for a younger woman (Glauke, Susan). Such an ending is not bearable for the rejected lover driving her to terrible and tragical deeds.87

Similarities go further still. The new lover of Joe/Jason, Glauke/Susan is treated with some disrespect by the authors. She is rather a symbol of youth then a complete personality. In both versions it is Medea/Alice who becomes the most important woman in the story. She is a mature woman who had found a safe place in life (marriage/priesthood) and now rejects it all for the love of a man. Her love, however, is consequently rejected by the man who choses for another woman, incomparable as a personality but younger and more beautiful than Alice/Medea.

Further similarities can be traced between certain scenes from Room at the Top and the myth of Jason and Medea represented here by Euripides' tragedy Medea. Jason swears that he would love Medea forever (Graves 1955: 506) and is consequently rejected by the Gods of Olympus when his promise is broken. A similar scene of love promises may be found in Braine's novel. The reasons that make Jason/Joe reject love of Medea/Alice are also identical. The "official" version is to get to a higher social level:

What happier fortune could I have lighted on
Than to wed a king's daughter, I, an exile? (Euripides 1939: 27)

claims Jason and similar are reasons put forward by Joe Lampton, as he claims: “Susan wasn't the real reason ... I was living [Alice] for Warley” (Braine 1973: 214) and Warley, the imaginary city, stands here for prosperity and future.

The underlying reason is a change of sexual interest. This is however much more subtly presented in Room at the Top, a novel generally

87 We follow here the version given by Euripides, Robert Graves claims that Medea was given immortality by the Gods consequently accusing Euripides of having been bribed by the Corinthians, guilty of killing the children of Jason and Medea, and changing the ending of the myth (cf. Graves 1955: 509).
characterized by a very open attitude to sex and sexual matters. In Euripides’ Medea Jason states that reasons of Medea's folly stem from the fact that:

Ah women, thus are you ever! While naught mars
Love's union, then you deem the whole world yours
But if some shadow cloud your wedded bliss
To you the best and fairest lot seems hateful (Euripides 1939: 28)

Medea accuses him in turn of following his own lust and not fulfilling his obligations:

Go, go! Enthralled by love for your new bride
Too long far from her chamber you are lingering (Euripides 1939: 30).

Alice Aisgill is even more straightforward:

She described everything we'd done together in Dorset, using the simplest Anglo-Saxon words and talking with a cool, dry detachment.

- It hasn't left any mark on you has it? It was only our bodies that did these things - your young and my - my old one that's well past its best. Why don't you say it, Joe? I'm thirty four and she's nineteen - you want someone young and strong and healthy (Braine 1973: 213).

The ends of the stories differ depending on versions, though in both cases the conclusion is tragic. In Euripides' tragedy Jason loses everything - his children, his future bride and with her the prospects of a better future as well as Medea. He survives the tragedy but Medea predicts his own imminent death:

But thou, vile wretch, by a vile death shalt thou die,
Thy head crushed by a beam from thine own Argo (Euripides 1939: 56).

Medea survives as well but is shattered by the deeds she had committed, as she says:

Well do I know the fell deed I must do:
But vanquished are all sober counsels now
By passionate anger, cause of man's worse woes (Euripides 1939: 46).

but feels satisfaction: “I have wrung thy heart in turn: thou art justly paid” (Euripides 1939: 54).

The ending of Room at the Top is notably different. Alice is unable to take her revenge, in her anger she turns against herself, she drinks as much as she can,
and crashes her car dying in the accident. It is Joe who will have to bear the burden of the tragedy he caused.

As it was already noted the story was widely used as a basis for various literary works and Euripides' Medea is chosen here due to its literary excellence out of many possible works. It is difficult to point it out a certain source for the Braine's novel why the novelist himself never made any literary inspiration clear. Bearing in mind Braine’s education, one may only suppose him to know Euripides' Medea, it is probably somewhat more possible that he read Graves's novel Hercules, My Shipmate (first published in 1945) or The Greek Myths. Still a fairly probable source could be Stendhal's novel Rouge et noir. As the number of possible sources is so big and the list by no means final it may be impossible to ever give a certain answer.

We have to agree with George Steiner that "the history of great drama is full of inspired plagiarism" (Steiner 1961: 42), adding only that the same applies to a great extent to the history of the novel. Braine was able to tell an old story (provided that, as we were trying to prove, he used it consciously) in an absolutely new way. His version was able to carry new meanings and to stir a social reaction. His novel manages to include just as much of the tragic element as it was possible in case of a realistic novel written in the 1950s without the book becoming a parody of the classic model. Braine left only the core of the myth, the basic conflict which gave the story a surprisingly modern outlook instead of simply retelling the old story in his own words, gaining a material for a novel the strength of which was unparalalled by anything he wrote later.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


ROOM AT THE TOP by John Braine –
A 1950s Version of the Myth of Jason and Medea?

The paper presents possible classical inspirations of John Braine’s novel Room at the Top (1957). It is an attempt to analyses the text of the novel belonging to the so called Angry Young Period as a tragic work which translated into the reality of the late 1940s Great Britain the myth of Jason and Medea, represented in the text of the paper by its most classic rendition, the ancient tragedy by Euripides entitled Medea. The article moves on to discuss the issue of to what extent it is possible to adapt classical material, and to what extent tragedy is impossible today while any attempt of recreating it must result in a parody of the classical form.