

4.2 To Sir, with Love

Eustace Edward Ricardo Braithwaite (1912 to 2016), known as **E. R. Braithwaite**, was a Guyanese-born British-American novelist, writer, teacher and diplomat, best known for his stories of social conditions and racial discrimination against black people. He was the author of one of the famous 1959 autobiographical novels, 'To Sir, with Love'.

He also wrote 'A Kind of Homecoming', about his tour of Africa, 'A Choice of Straws', a novel set in London, and 'Reluctant Neighbors', a memoir and treatise about racism. Braithwaite's numerous writings primarily deal with the difficulties of being an educated black man, a black social worker, a black teacher, and simply a human being who found himself in a set of inhumane circumstances.



'To Sir, with Love' is an autobiographical novel. The narrator is an engineer, but to make both ends meet, he accepts the job of a teacher in a rough London East End school. The school is full of troublemaker students who were rejected from other schools for their behaviour. At the beginning, the narrator is ridiculed and bullied by the students, but later his calm demeanor and desire to see them succeed gradually earn him their respect.

Characters

Major Characters

- Ricky Braithwaite, Narrator
- Gillian Blanchard
- Mrs. Dale-Evans
- Denham
- Pamela Dare
- Mr. Florian

Minor Characters

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| • Bob Belmont | • Jess Belmont |
| • Jacqueline Bender | • Buckley |
| • Clinty | • Josy Dawes |
| • Selma Drew | • Patrick Fernman |
| • Hackman | • Tich Jackson |
| • Moira Joseph | • Monica Page |
| • Palmer | • Barbera Pegg |
| • Euphema Phillips | • Potter |
| • Jane Purcell | • Sapiano |
| • Larence Seales | • Theo Watson |

Summary of the Novel

'To Sir, with Love' is a work of fiction based on the life of the author, E.R. Braithwaite. The main character, E. R. Braithwaite, works as an engineer in an oil refinery. He served in the Royal British Air Force in the war. After the war, being a black person, he was unable to find employment. As a last resort, he applied in a school to become a teacher. Surprisingly, he is accepted at the Greenslade School in London's East End, and is set to teach the senior classes of the school.

While reading the novel, we have to understand that the time period in which the story takes place is very important. Braithwaite finds that even though he considers himself British and has served in the Royal Air Force (RAF), the English do not consider him to be one of them. This leads Braithwaite to feel bitter about the English and colonialism, as well as about his white students.

Braithwaite's teaching position starts out roughly and is embarrassed time and again. He considers his students disrespectful, ill-mannered and mischievous while his students consider him to be an arrogant outsider, unfamiliar with the social environment in which they have grown up. The students harass him from day one, slamming their desks during his lecture, using foul language, and bullying him to a great extent. Even the girl students do not spare a moment to harass Braithwaite. In a reaction to that Braithwaite verbally scolds the girls for acting in an unladylike manner and being unruly in the class.

When he understands that his outburst has not gained him any respect and co-operation from the students, he changes his teaching and handling tactics and he decides

to interact with them as though they are adults and respectable persons. He requires every girl be referred to as 'Miss' and that his students call him 'Sir.' At first, the students find this level of deference ridiculous and unnecessary; however, they come around after only a few weeks, completely changing both their hygiene and their attitudes towards one another. This marks the success of Braithwaite in handling the students in a very amicable way.

To increase the class cultural exposure, he takes them on field trips and excursions to museums and theatres, to everyone's surprise many of the students have never been. A white female teacher, Gillian Blanchard, accompanies the class on these excursions; this marks the beginning of a friendship between Blanchard and Braithwaite. Similarly, Braithwaite's relationship with his students is tested many a times.

Although his students frequently disappoint and hurt him, he learns to forgive them, the students constantly surprise him with their maturity, empathy and knowledge.

Another facet of the story which greatly affects its narrative lies in the heavy history of colonialism, its dark consequences, mental and physical trauma that increases Braithwaite's hatred and wrath for British. He constantly feels the prejudicial effects of colonialism while living in England after World War II, and these negative experiences frequently shape his thoughts and actions. Braithwaite is surprised and shocked by the conditions in which these students live, and also the physical trauma of the war that can be seen throughout his teaching environment.

Theme of the Novel

Students-teacher relationship, prejudice and racism are the major themes of the novel.

E. R. Braithwaite gets a job of a teacher in a rather rough and notorious school. He finds that the students belong to a background that is not suitable for learning and their overall development and progress. He notices that the students are in no mood to change their attitude and behaviour. Braithwaite with his novel and creative ideas, innovative techniques and understanding the students' psychology, ultimately wins their hearts in no time. Though he was bullied, harassed, mentally and physically tortured many times, he didn't lose his patience and continued implementing his novel ideas and techniques that helped him to bring a significant change in his students' lives.

The racism prevalent in Great Britain during the mid-1940s, the time period during which 'To Sir, with Love' takes place, is of primary significance in the novel. The narrator cites repeated incidents in which he experiences the racism of white Britons, including encounters on the bus, at job interviews, at Greenslade school, when searching for housing, at a restaurant with his girl friend and so on.

At the outset, Braithwaite is struck by the unexpectedness of such prejudice. He was brought up in British Guiana and he viewed himself as a British citizen, not as a black British citizen in a British colony. When he served Great Britain in the Royal Air Force, that gave him respect and esteem in the society. The day he left the job, he finds himself to be an outsider.

Braithwaite's extensive experience and education was of no use in job interviews, where he is informed that the job has already been filled or he is overqualified for it. This heightens Braithwaite's sense of betrayal for the British. Interestingly, he never lashes out physically and only rarely does he do so verbally. He exhibits patient endurance at times, and at others he describes the way the rage inside him is transforming into hatred so strong that he desires to hurt those who treat him unfairly. As a result of such experiences, Braithwaite finds the students at the Greenslade school to be a bit notorious and rough in behaviour but with proper care and treatment, all the students would surely achieve success and desired goals in their lives.

Synopsis of the Extract

In this extract, Braithwaite recounts the half-yearly report of the Students' Council, in which the students of the school report to the faculty and other students on what they have been studying thus far. Braithwaite's class representatives speak knowledgeably about their coursework and place a considerable amount of emphasis on how much they have learnt about different people, cultures, customs, and the importance of international and interracial cooperation.

Miss Joseph and Denham, both students of Braithwaite's class, preside over the meeting. At the outset, Mr. Florian, the headmaster, addresses the meeting with a lengthy, but well-received presentation. One after another, each class gives a brief report of their progress, through their chosen representatives, on what they have been studying in each subject so far. A panel of teachers is chosen for each class to answer any questions regarding the report submitted by the class. The lowest class

begins first, and it is obvious that as the students progress through the ranks there is 'a marked development in their ability to express themselves'. Mr. Braithwaite's class, being the oldest, was the last to present their report.

Miss Joseph begins the highest class's proceedings by clarifying that the common theme underlying all their studies this term is the interdependency of mankind. Potter speaks in the field of math, focusing on how greater understanding in the world is fostered by the use of common weights and measures. Miss Pegg and Jackson speak on geography, and Miss Dare and Fernman discuss the subject of physiology, with Fernman stealing the show by exhibiting a model of a human skeleton and stressing the class conclusion that "basically all people were the same." Miss Dodd reports on history, and Miss

Joseph on domestic science. Denham creates a stir by speaking on the required subject of P.T. and games, complaining that the class 'was ill-conceived and pointless.'

Mr. Weston, Mrs. Dale-Evans, and Miss Phillips are chosen at random to answer students' questions arising from the senior presentations. When Denham pursues his inquiry on the necessity of requiring all students to take P.T., Mr. Weston responds quite ridiculously, trying to bluster his way out of the subject, and offering no coherent argument. Unexpectedly, the quiet and hesitant Miss Phillips steps in and gives a sturdy defense of the practice, and Denham, knowing that he has been outwitted, has no choice but to respectfully cease his heated protest. Braithwaite is immensely satisfied with the progress of the students of his class.

To Sir, with Love

Chapter 17

The half-yearly report of the Students' Council was on November 15th, and was one of the important days in the calendar of Greenslade School. I had heard quite a deal about these occasions and became as excited as the children as the day approached. It was entirely their day, arranged, presented and controlled by them. I observed the activities of my class as they prepared for it, noting with pride the business-like way in which tasks were allocated and fitted into a neat programme. There were whispered conferences with members of other classes in the arrangement of it. On that day there was no assembly. The children arrived smartly dressed and polished, and Miss Joseph and Denham, who seemed to

be the important officials for the occasion, moved about among their colleagues ensuring that each one was ready to play his (her) part.

A bell was rung at 10.00 a.m. and everyone **trooped** into the auditorium to sit together in classes. Miss Joseph and Denham, the two most senior students, sat on the stage, one on each side of Mr. Florian, who, as soon as everyone was seated and silent, stood and addressed the school. He spoke at length, reiterating the aims and policy of the school and of the important contribution each child could make to the **furtherance** of those aims. He gave praise wherever it was indicated, but insisted that there was yet a great deal to be done, by themselves, towards a general

improvement in conduct, cleanliness and the pursuit of knowledge. As I listened I realised that this man was in no way remote from his school; his remarks all showed that he identified himself with it and everyone in it. He then wished them success with the Council Meeting and left the stage to tremendous applause.

Things now moved quickly into gear. First, Miss Joseph stood up, and gave a short explanation of the Council's purpose and its activities. Each class would report, through its representatives, on the studies pursued during the half year which began after Easter, a representative having been chosen for each subject. When all the classes had completed their reports a panel of teachers would be invited to occupy the stage and answer questions from the body of the hall on matters arising out of the various reports. The selection of the panel, as with everything else, was entirely at the **discretion** of the children and no members of the staff knew either how many or which teachers would be invited to sit. The reports began with the lowest or youngest class first. These were mainly twelve-year-olds who had joined the school the previous summer. Most of them were shy and rather frightened at standing up before the entire school, but nevertheless they managed it creditably; they had been newly introduced to the difficulties of seeking information for themselves, so their report was understandably rather short.

Class after class was represented, and it was obvious that with each succeeding term there was a marked development

in their ability to express themselves. Much of the work was rather elementary, but to them it loomed large because they understood it and something of its relationship to themselves. Throughout all the reports, the emphasis was on what they understood rather than on what they were expected to learn. When the turn of my class came I sat up anxiously. From the list he held in his hand, Denham called out the names of the representatives, together with the subjects on which they would report.

Potter — Arithmetic

Sapiano — Nature Study

Miss Pegg and Jackson — Geography

Miss Dare and Fernman — Physiology

Miss Dodd — History

Denham — P.T. and Games

Miss Joseph — Domestic Science

I felt terribly pleased and proud to see the confident courtesy with which Denham used the term 'Miss' in addressing each of the senior girls; I felt sure that this would in itself be something for the younger ones to aim at, a sort of badge of young adulthood. As their names were called they walked up to the stage and took their seats with **commendable gravity**. Miss Joseph then gave a short **address**. She said that their lessons had a particular bias towards the brotherhood of mankind, and that they had been learning through each subject how all mankind was interdependent in spite of geographical location and differences in colour, races and creeds. Then she called on Potter. Potter went on to speak of the work they had done on weights and measures; of the

relationship between the kilogramme and the pound, the metre and the foot. He said that throughout the world one or other of those two methods was either in use or understood, and that it was a symbol of the greater understanding which was being accomplished between **peoples**. Sapiano spoke of the study the class had made of pests, especially black rot on wheat, boll weevil on cotton, and the Colorado beetle on potatoes. He showed how many countries had pooled their knowledge and results of research on the behaviour, breeding habits and migration of these pests, and were gradually reducing the threat they represented to these important products. Miss Pegg and Jackson divided the report on Geography between them. Jackson spoke first on the distribution of mineral deposits and vegetable produce over the earth's surface, how a country rich in one was often deficient in the other; and of the interchange and interdependence which inevitably followed. Miss Pegg dealt with human relationships, stressing the problems facing the post-war world for feeding, clothing and housing its populations. She also made a reference to the thousands of refugees, stateless and unwanted; and to the efforts and programmes of U.N.I.C.E.F. Fernman as usual had a trump card up his sleeve. When called he made a signal to someone off-stage, and Welsh and Alison appeared bearing a skeleton between them, together with a sort of gallows.

When this arrangement had been set up there was the skeleton hanging from a hook screwed into the top of its skull, gently revolving at the end of a cord. This

was somewhat in the nature of comic relief, and the school showed its approval by laughing uproariously. But **levity** soon evaporated when Fernman began to speak; his voice was clear and precise and he had a strong sense of the dramatic. Calmly he told them that it was a female skeleton; that was a fact and could easily be proved. But he could not say with any assurance whether she had been Chinese or French or German or Greek; nor could he say if she had been brown or white or a mixture of both. And from that, he said, the class had concluded that basically all people were the same; the trimmings might be different but the foundations were all laid out according to the same blueprint. Fernman was wonderful; he had them eating out of his hand. Miss Dare's contribution was something of an anticlimax after Fernman's performance, and she seemed to realise it. She spoke about the problems which all humanity has to face in terms of sickness and disease, and of the advantages gained by interchange of knowledge, advice and assistance.

Miss Dodd reported on the period of History the class had studied – the Reformation in England. She told of the struggles of men of independent spirit against clerical domination and of their efforts to break from established religious traditions. From those early beginnings gradually grew the idea of tolerance for the beliefs and cultures of others, and the now common interest in trying to study and understand those cultures. Denham's report was a bit of a shock. He severely criticised the general pattern of P.T. and games, emphasising the serious

limitations of space obtaining and the effect of that limitation on their games activities. He complained that the P.T. was ill-conceived and pointless, and the routine monotonous; he could see no advantage in doing it; a jolly good game was far better. Apparently he was voicing the opinions of all the boys, for they cheered him loudly. When the reports were over, Denham called two children at random from the audience and asked them to write the name of each teacher, including the Head on a slip of paper.

These slips were folded and placed in a hat, juggled vigorously, and then withdrawn one by one. The names were called: Mr. Weston, Mrs. Dale-Evans, Miss Phillips Denham and Miss Joseph led the others off the stage and the teachers took their seats, Weston big and bushily untidy between the two women. Then the questioning began. I believe I would have gone a long way to see what followed; it was an experience which I shall not easily forget. The questions were mostly from the two top classes, probably because the young children were either too timid or too uninformed to formulate their questions. The teachers had no briefing, and were often caught out stammering in their indecision. But here again, I received a big surprise. The frilly, seemingly brainless Miss Euphemia Phillips proved to be the coolest and best informed of the three. She dealt with questions put to her with **candour** and authority, and would often intervene skillfully to assist one of the others without causing embarrassment. Weston cut a very ridiculous figure. In the face of Denham's blunt criticisms

and Fernman's **adroit** questioning, he found himself completely **nonplussed** and tried to bluster his way out with a show of offended dignity. He could not effectively support the P.T. exercises, for which he was partly responsible, as having any definite physical advantage. Denham was a trained boxer, and insisted that such exercises were only advantageous if practised daily and for more sustained periods; P.T. twice weekly for twenty minutes was a waste of time, he asserted. Once again Miss Phillips took the reins and her stock promptly shot up a hundredfold. She reminded the school that every subject, including P.T. and games, had been carefully considered and fitted into the teaching timetable so that each student received maximum benefit from it. The school with its limited facilities must be considered in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number, and it would be beyond anyone's powers to please everybody. 'Some of you,' she concluded, fixing Denham with innocent eyes, 'are fortunate in your own fine physical development and do not really need the few meagre helpings of P.T. and games which this school can offer; try to remember that there are others for whom our programme is ideally suited. It may be that some of you older boys might even be able to help in that respect.' Denham was not to be put off by these sugary remarks, and rose in reply. 'Then why do we have to do P.T.? Why don't they take only the kids who need it? The rest of us can have a game of football or something, 'stead of doing a lot of daft things that's no good to us!' This was a

poser, but she came right back at him, her baby-blue eyes twinkling in her delight at this crossing of staves. 'Let's say it is as much an exercise of the mind as it is of the body, Denham. The whole timetable in this school is meant to help you in the world after you leave here, and doing what you are told in spite of not liking it, is part of the training. I feel sure that you will see the point in that.' That stopped him. Poor Denham knew that he'd been outwitted but he could do nothing about

it and sat looking rather rueful, while Miss Phillips' smile broadened; this frilly, innocent-looking puss had gobbled her canary without leaving the tiniest feather.

I began to understand how it was that so slight a creature could cope so effectively with her class. Soon after this, as the morning ended, the Head went on to the stage and closed the proceedings, expressing his pride in all the children and his deep appreciation of their efforts.

- E. R. Braithwaite

trooped: moved together in large numbers

furtherance: the advancement of a scheme or interest

discretion: the freedom to decide what should be done in a particular situation

commendable: deserving praise

gravity: here extreme importance, seriousness

address: a formal speech

peoples: the members of different nations, communities or ethnic group

levity: the treatment of a serious matter with humour

candour: quality of being open and honest

adroit: clever or skilful

nonplussed: surprised or confused

poser: a problem or question that is difficult to solve or answer

BRAINSTORMING

CHARACTER

(A1) (i) Which one among the following is a teacher in the extract? Select the correct one. Also cite a couple of lines from the extract in support of your answer.





(a) Denham

(c) Sapiano

(b) Miss Joseph

(d) Dale-Evans

(ii) Complete the table highlighting the various traits of the major characters in the extract.

1. Denham	 <div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> </div>
2. Miss Phillips	 <div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> </div>
3. Fernman	 <div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> </div>
4. Potter	 <div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> </div>

(iii) The narrator played a crucial role in bringing a significant change in the students. Explain the statement by citing some references from the extract.

(iv) Fernman brought a comic relief in the Students' Council programme. Explain.

(v) Give a brief character-sketch of –

- Denham
- Miss Joseph
- The Narrator
- Miss Dare
- Miss Phillips

(vi) Compare the following characters :

Miss Joseph and Denham	Fernman and Miss Dare
.....
.....
.....
.....
Miss Phillips and Denham	Narrator and the Head of the school
.....
.....
.....
.....

PLOT

(A2) (i) Arrange the incidents in correct sequence as per their occurrence in the extract.

- (a) Denham was outwitted by Miss Phillips.
- (b) The head of the school closed the proceedings.
- (c) Denham asserted that P.T. periods were a waste of time.
- (d) The slips were folded and placed in a hat.
- (e) Fernman was as usual a trump card.
- (f) Denham called out the names of the representatives.
- (g) Students' Council was held every year on November 15th.

(ii) Describe in brief the purpose of organising the half-yearly report programme of Students' Council.

(iii) Write in your words the entire half-yearly report programme of Students' Council.

(iv) Describe the question-answer session that took place at the end of the extract.

(v) Describe the discussion that took place between Miss Joseph and Denham.

SETTING

(A3) (i) Which event took place in the extract? Choose the correct one. Give reason/s to support your answer.

- (a) Annual Sports Day on November 15th
- (b) Annual Social and Cultural Gathering on November 15th
- (c) Half-yearly report of Students' Council on November 15th
- (d) Farewell Programme on November 15th

(ii) The event in the extract was held at the _____. Choose the correct alternative. Give reason/s to support your answer.

- (a) author's house
- (b) auditorium of the school
- (c) market
- (d) garden

(iii) The incidents in the extract occurred at a particular place. Explain the significance of that place in your own words.

(iv) Explain how the setting of the extract contributes to the theme of the novel.

THEME

(A4) (i) ‘When the turn of my class came I sat up anxiously’.

Why was the narrator anxious? Explain the statement by citing suitable references from the extract.

(ii) Select two statements that describe the theme of the extract:

- (a) Half-yearly report of the Students’ Council was not an important event for the students and teachers of school.
- (b) The writer was immensely pleased to notice the progress of his students.
- (c) The students showed a remarkable change in their behaviour and were progressing in all the subjects.
- (d) The head of the institution was against conducting such activities in the school.

(iii) The relationship between the teacher and the students is highlighted in the extract. Illustrate with suitable examples from the extract.

(iv) Explain in brief the theme of the extract.

(v) Describe the atmosphere of the school described in the extract.

LANGUAGE

(A4) (i) Explain the following statements that enrich the language and create a powerful impact.

- (a) Miss Phillips is transformed into a very convincing personality.
- (b) There are many features of language that contribute the smooth sailing of the plot.

(ii) Following are some dialogues of the major characters in the extract. Find out who the speaker is, his/her tone, the style, significance etc. of the dialogues.

