

Introduction to Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970)

Between tradition and innovation

Forster is one of the most meaningful voices in 20th century English literature. He belongs to the long list of English novelists (from Fielding through Dickens to Jane Austen and Thackeray up to Hardy) who used their art to describe the features of the society in which they lived and **the effects of society on man's mentality and life**, often with critical irony.

His work is a long battle to open the eyes of modern man **against hypocrisy and prejudice, stereotypes and intolerance**.

To this purpose he gave further scope by **contrasting geographical and social realities** (e.g. Indian and Italian) with the English one and taking as a starting point for his comparison the need for **social justice and explicit anti- imperialism**.

Already in his first novel, *Where the Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) set in San Gimignano, the writer gives a sympathetic, portrait of the Italians, opposed to the coldness and suspicion typical of the English.

A Room with a View (1908) deals with similar themes in a more complex way. The story develops between England and Florence, but it is "the view" of the title which metaphorically plays an important role in the text, i.e. the capacity to see and understand reality which allows to throw down prejudice and intolerance and to overcome national barriers. In the novel Forster builds up an opposition between characters that he defines as "medieval" (like Cecil Vyse, who looks at Italy with suspicion and diffidence due to his puritanic background) and "renaissance" (like the protagonist, Lucy, who gradually develops a revolutionary open minded attitude towards "otherness"). **The mythical Mediterranean world of life and love is opposed to the English world of darkness and hypocrisy**. The "undeveloped heart" that Forster considered the typical English malaise could be developed in Italy, and his characters could come to a new awareness as the country works its "pernicious charm".

In his last and greatest novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster's persistent concern with cultural difference is combined with an exploration of British imperialism. *A Passage to India* is **a fierce satire of colonialism**.

The Indian landscape dominates the novel from the beginning to the end, forcing the protagonists to come "face to face with themselves" and challenging the established values of Western civilization. The novel deals with a major event of this century, the **dissolution of British dominion over India**. Whereas Kipling had given an enchanting picture of Imperial India, Forster recorded the moment of British India's transformation into a new country. The non-cooperation movement and Gandhi wanted social equality between the British and the Indians. Forster shared this view and criticized imperialistic policies of discrimination under which personal relations were spoilt.

The isolation of the British community at Chandrapore, the atrocities suffered by the Indians, the agitation of the natives, all these issues are present in the novel. The development of an Indian national consciousness is described in the character of Aziz.

Dr Aziz, an Indian Muslim physician, is bound to suffer constant harassments from British colonialists. However, not all the English behave in the same way: Mrs Moore (whose name is reminiscent of the spiritualist philosopher George Moore, suggesting interior freedom from prejudice) respects his faith and, at the beginning of the novel, takes off her shoes when entering a mosque, as, she remarks, “God is here”.

Mrs Moore stands for some kind of poetic vision of life. She experiences the fundamental unity of the universe opposed to the narrow-minded mentality and conceited sense of superiority of most British officers in India (according to Mrs Moore imperialism is based on “**exercise of power and the subtle pleasure of personal superiority**”). She symbolically represents an intuitive approach to life and a perception of the reality behind appearances, which allows her to overcome racial and cultural barriers.

The other “atypical” English is the headmaster of the local College, Cyril Fielding, who shares Mrs Moore’s humanistic approach. However, if in previous novels a solution of conflicts was still possible, a real dialogue between different cultures is unattainable when one country is ruling over the other. The English attempt to bring *their* idea of “order” to the “muddle”, “mystery”, chaos and multiplicity of the Indian vision of the world (symbolized by the Marabar Caves: empty, dark caves with an uncanny echo) is bound to failure. The English obsession with classification, order and sharp, clear-cut distinctions is incompatible with the shifting quality of India itself. As Mrs Moore realizes in the end, there is no “real India”, but rather a complex multitude of different Indias that defy labelling and understanding.

The novel suggests that Fielding and Aziz may become real friends only after India gains independence. Forster is not a novelist of solutions and his fiction at its best proposes incompleteness.

The theme of friendship is fundamental in Forster’s life and fiction, and linked to his vision of a **classless society**.

The relationship between two boys of different classes is already central in the early short story “The story of a panic”, set in Italy, and in the posthumous novel *Maurice*. However, Forster’s own reticence and the threat of censorship and possible prosecution prevented him publishing *Maurice* or the short stories, among which “The life to come”, that deal openly with homosexuality (at that

time still regarded as a criminal offence). These restrictions partly contributed to the block that ultimately brought his fiction writing career to an end after 1924.

Though maintaining the traditional structure of the novel and the third person omniscient narrator, Forster is not a “realist” in the traditional sense and his writings can be read on two different levels: the literal and the symbolic.

In the poetic concentration of his prose and his interest in the life of the mind – the internal lives of the characters – he is very much **a modernist**.

Forster has contributed something new to the English novel, i.e. the attention to the limits imposed by bourgeois education on the development of feeling and on the life of impulse: a theme he shares with D.H. Lawrence.



10.22

Edward Morgan Forster

1879-1970

Life and main works

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879. His father died short afterwards and he was brought up by his mother and his great-aunt, whose financial help enabled him to live comfortably all his life. He spent his childhood at Rooksnest, the house he later depicted in his novel *Howards End*, where he was educated by his mother until the age of eleven. Then he was sent to Eastbourne, a strict preparatory school, and then to Tonbridge School. He lived both experiences as a sort of spiritual imprisonment until, in 1897, he entered King's College, Cambridge. University years proved stimulating. Forster came under the influence of the philosopher G.E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* inspired his faith in the importance of human relationships and in the cult of art and beauty as the only ways «to connect», to find harmony in the face of the increasing disintegration of the world.

After leaving Cambridge – which he returned to in 1946 as an Honorary Fellow of King's College, and where he was to spend the rest of his life – he lived for a time in Italy, the background of his first and third novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908). In both works he explored the differences between the strictness of English conventions and upper-middle-class codes of social behaviour and the more spontaneous and relaxed way of life of the Italians. Between these two books, he published *The Longest Journey* (1907), a novel about English life, perhaps the most autobiographical of the three. Then followed the first of his two masterpieces, *Howards End* (1910).

It was in 1912 that Forster went to India for the first time, and in 1914 he began to work on an Indian novel. This was delayed by the war, which took him to Alexandria, in Egypt, and he paid a second visit to India in 1921 before resuming it. *A Passage to India* was finally published in 1924; it portrays post-Kipling India at a time of transition. Forster was not a prolific writer. Besides the books mentioned, he published two volumes of short stories, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), a series of lectures on modern aesthetics, and two books of collected essays.

He died in 1970 and the following year *Maurice* appeared, the novel he had written as early as 1914 to release and overcome the sense of guilt linked to his homosexuality, at that time still regarded as a criminal offence. Forster's novels have been made into successful films in recent years by the film directors David Lean (*A Passage to India*), James Ivory (*A Room with a View*, *Mau-*

rice, *Howards End*), and Charles Sturridge (*Where Angels Fear to Tread*).

Tradition and modernity in Forster's work

Forster's themes, tone, and literary method have often been described as old-fashioned, directly inherited from the 19th century. However, his work presents an interesting balance of traditional and modern elements, especially in his last two novels, *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*.

Forster is first and foremost a writer of comedies of manners, who is attentive to his own social and historical context. He is also regarded as a child of English middle-class liberalism. Forster derives much from the Victorian tradition, but the optimism about the future that one finds in most 19th-century fiction is already questioned in his work before the First World War, through the technique of irony, reminiscent of Jane Austen's (8.13). Certainly he is not a novelist of solutions because his fiction at its best proposes incompleteness.

The personal vision

Forster lays emphasis on personal vision and relationships. His complexity derives from his talent for self-scrutiny, his power to be ironic and to question the culture on which he draws and to which he remains attached.

The aims of the last two books are evidently greater than those of the first three novels and the short stories.

The early books are more humorous; in the last two novels there is the attempt to achieve some kind of poetic vision, to approach through sensation and experience what gives meaning to life and affords a visionary understanding of it.

Style

Forster pays close attention to rhythm and pattern, he exploits a leitmotif (like the wasp in *A Passage to India*), or creates elemental characters, like Mrs Wilcox in *Howards End* and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*, who symbolically represent an orderly approach to life, who perceive the reality behind appearances.

Forster is ultimately a romantic writer in that his work reflects some of the tensions and conflicts peculiar to Romanticism. He has a romantic existential commitment to the visionary moment, when truth is suddenly revealed, though his position is sometimes modified by his ironic detachment.

A Passage to India (1924) by Edward M. Forster

The setting of the novel is the city of Chandrapore on the banks of the river Ganges at the beginning of the century, when India was still under British rule. The main characters are divided into two groups, the Indians and the British. Among the Indians, Dr Aziz a Muslim doctor and Godbole, a Hindu professor, represent the two main ethnic groups divided by religious differences and cultural values.

The British are also divided according to their different attitudes to the natives: the British officials, among whom Ronald Heaslop, and their wives who show a mixture of condescension and contempt toward the natives, and Fielding, who is the British Education Officer there, Mrs Moore, Heaslop's mother, and Adela Quested, his fiancée, who feel a genuine interest in the natives' culture and way of living, and believe in liberal principles.

On her arrival in Chandrapore, Mrs Moore meets Dr Aziz in a temple: they immediately feel mutual respect and sympathy. It is for this reason that Dr Aziz invites Mrs Moore and Adela to visit the Marabar Caves, famous for their beauty and their religious significance.

When they reach the Caves, however, the experience becomes dramatic for both women: while Mrs Moore seems to lose all her faith in mankind, Adela becomes the victim to a hysterical attack and believes that Dr Aziz has attempted to assault her.

Dr Aziz is taken to prison and tried, while the relationships between the Indians and the British become even tenser.

When speaking in the witness-box, Adela suddenly re-lives the scene at the Caves and realizes that Dr Aziz is completely innocent. Dr Aziz is free but he has become aware that there cannot be friendship between the British and the natives. Mrs Moore, who left India before the trial, dies on her way back to England, having lost her idealism but having achieved a more profound understanding of human nature.

Adela returns to England alone and Fielding marries Mrs Moore's daughter. The novel closes with the desolate remark that it was not yet time for the people of that generation to be friends. Perhaps that would become possible for the future generations.

What follows is a comic confusion of Eros (sexual love) and Agape (the love of God). Vithobai puts out the light and embraces Paul, having been told to "come to Christ" and that the Christian God is Love.

After this passionate interlude, Paul is racked with guilt and remorse, but when the other missionaries hear that Vithobai and his entire tribe have converted to Christianity, Paul is treated with new respect, and is put in charge of the district for ten years. During that time the forest surrounding the village is cleared for timber, a mine is opened nearby, and Vithobai, now called Barnabas, gradually loses his power and wealth. Vithobai submits to all this because he loves Paul. Paul has never explained the Christian view of their sin, because he knows that by doing so he will lose Vithobai's co-operation in his missionary activity.

At the end of the story, Paul and his wife (both he and Vithobai have married in the meantime) are preparing to leave the valley, and Vithobai is dying. Paul goes to Vithobai in the hope that now he can confess his sin and ask Vithobai's forgiveness. In doing so, he reminds Vithobai of the life to come, and says that they will meet there, and that there will be love. Vithobai then stabs the missionary and throws himself joyously from the roof of his house, in the hope of perfect union with his beloved in the life to come.

Beneath a surface of grotesque comedy and final melodrama, the story is a deeply sad one. Vithobai, like Kipling's *Lispeth*, is honest, innocent, and capable of enduring love. Paul, like the Chaplain's wife in Kipling's story, is duplicitous, hypocritical, and incapable of understanding the true nature of the person whose life he has wrecked. The ruin of the landscape, the importation of disease, and the degradation of Vithobai himself all tend to represent imperialism as mindlessly destructive. The British came to Vithobai's valley with thoughts of establishing "civilization", but in fact they have destroyed an indigenous beauty and harmony that they never appreciated. Vithobai, the narrator, and the reader mourn this lost beauty together.

The Life to Come

"The Life to Come" is both a love story and a story about imperial domination. Though written in 1922, it was not published until after Forster's death because, like his novel *Maurice* and various other short stories, it deals explicitly with homosexual desire. In an unspecified tropical setting, the young missionary Paul Pinmay is sent to convert Vithobai, a tribal chief, to Christianity. After a day of apparent failure, Vithobai comes alone to Paul's hut dressed in nothing but red flowers.