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MACMILLAN MASTER GUIDES

HOWARDS END

BY E. M. FORSTER

IAN MILLIGAN

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The aim of the Macmillan Master Guides is to help you to appreciate the book you are studying by providing information about it and by suggesting ways of reading and thinking about it that will lead to fuller understanding. The section on the writer's life and background have been designed to illustrate those aspects of the writer's life which have influenced the work, and to place it in its personal and literary context. The summaries and critical commentary are of special importance in that each brief summary of the action is followed by an examination of the significant critical points. The space which might have been given to repetitive explanatory notes has been devoted to a detailed analysis of the kind of passage which might confront you in an examination. Literary criticism is concerned with both the broader aspects of the work being studied and with its detail. The ideas which meet us in reading a great work of literature, and their relevance to us today, are an essential part of our study, and our Guides look at the thought of their subject in some detail. But just as essential is the craft with which the writer has constructed his work of art, and this may be considered under several technical headings — characterisation, language, style and stagecraft, for example.

The authors of these Guides are all teachers and writers of wide experience, and they have chosen to write about books they admire and know well in the belief that they can communicate their admiration to you. But you yourself must read and know intimately the book you are studying. No one can do that for you. You should see this book as a lamp-post. Use it to shed light, not to lean against. If you know your text and know what it is saying about life, and how it says it, then you will enjoy it, and there is no better way of passing an examination in literature.

JAMES GIBSON

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Cover illustration: *Women Seated in a Garden* by Toulouse-Lautrec. Reported by Courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.

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1 THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879. His mother, Lily Winchelo, was a young woman of intelligence and character, who had been befriended by a well-to-do spinster connected with a famous group of philanthropic Evangelical Christians called 'The Clapham Sect'. His father, the nephew of Lily's benefactress, died soon after his son was born. After living with various friends, Forster's mother took him to live in a house called 'Rooksnest' in Stevenage, Hertfordshire. The description of 'Howards End' in the first chapter of the novel is closely based on 'Rooksnest'. It, too, had a meadow, a vine and a wych-elm into the bark of which were stuck 'three or four fangs', according to Forster's later account. Forster was a precocious and imaginative child, closely attached to his lively mother. Apart from a succession of garden boys, who were his childhood playmates, he grew up in a household of women.

After he had spent some years in a preparatory school at Eastbourne, his mother moved to Tonbridge in Kent so that he could attend Tonbridge School as a day-boy. There he studied classics and was interested in music, art and literature. Although he did not enjoy his school-days, he had some academic success and won a place at King's College, Cambridge, in 1896. There he gradually made friends and became a member of discussion groups whose members were sceptical and open-minded. He began to lose his belief in Christianity. By his third year in Cambridge he had established himself as an intelligent but rather whimsical man of wide intellectual sympathies, his reading embracing the whole of classical and modern English literature. He was liberal and anti-imperialist at a time when the war against the Boers in South Africa generated much militaristic feeling in Britain. He graduated in 1900 with a degree in classics but was able to study history for a further year on the strength of a College Scholarship. In that year he was elected to the 'Apostles', a distinguished, if secretive, Cambridge discussion group which combined friendship and the pursuit of truth. Among its

leading members at this time were G. E. Moore, the philosopher, G. H. Hardy, the mathematician, and, a close friend of Forster's at the time, H. O. Meredith, who later became a professor of economics at Belfast. Forster was impressed with his self-confidence and good looks, and it was through his friendship with Meredith that he came to recognise his own homosexuality.

Forster had been left money by his mother's benefactress, so that he did not immediately need to pursue a career. His academic attainments were not thought good enough for him to hope for a fellowship at Cambridge, but he had made a first attempt to begin writing a novel. He chose to visit Italy with his mother, intending to equip himself to become an extra-mural lecturer in art or Italian history. While he was there, he wrote his first short story. By 1904 Forster and his mother were living in London. He had begun to contribute to a new monthly called *The Independent Review* and he had begun work on a novel based on his Italian experiences, which was the embryo of *A Room With a View*. He had begun to do some extra-mural teaching for Cambridge; he taught in the Working Men's College in London, and he had been asked to produce an edition of Virgil's *Aeneid*. He began to explore the English landscape on a number of walking-tours, and had an encounter with a young shepherd boy near Salisbury which was incorporated into the material for a novel which he had sketched out in the summer of 1904 and which developed into *The Longest Journey*. By the end of 1904 he had in hand three novels and some short stories. He felt dissatisfied, however, because he had no regular work; at the suggestion of a friend he went to Germany as tutor to the children of an Australian writer who had married a German count. At the same time his first novel – *Where Angels Fear to Tread* – was accepted for publication.

After his return to England in 1906 he was asked to tutor an Indian boy, Syed Ross Masood, who was about to go to Oxford. He was the grandson of a famous Muslim educationalist, but he had been brought up in England. Forster and he became close friends and it was from this friendship that Forster's interest in India developed. In 1907 Forster's second novel, *The Longest Journey*, was published. It is the most autobiographical of his novels; its early chapters reflects some aspects of his life at Cambridge. It is also Forster's most trenchant attack on the meanness of spirit which he found so stifling in English middle-class life. In 1908 his third novel, *A Room with a View*, was published. Although Forster was dissatisfied with it, it has a brilliant lightness of tone and a sympathetic heroine who, though surrounded by the orthodox English society described in his earlier novels, manages to escape to a life of happiness with a spontaneously affectionate young man, not quite of her own class.

Literary success brought Forster into contact with a wider world. He began to associate with the 'Bloomsbury Group' of writers and

artists brought together by the daughters of a well-known Victorian literary man, Leslie Stephen, one of whom was later to become famous as the novelist, Virginia Woolf. Now he began to work on his next novel, *Howards End*, drawing for some of his material on the people he had met at the Working Man's College. Some parts of the novel – the account of Helen's seduction, in particular – caused adverse comment among its first readers, not, as might be expected, on the grounds of its implausibility but because it was considered improper. But the novel was in general greeted as the work of a significant new writer whose literary reputation was now established.

In 1912 he left with two friends for his first visit to India. Although he greatly enjoyed this experience, much of which he later used in *A Passage to India*, he found it difficult to complete a new novel he had begun in 1911. Forster had come to believe that he could not write more novels about relationships between men and women. He wrote a novel called *Maurice* about homosexual relationships, but he knew that this and other short stories on this theme could not be published.

On the outbreak of war in 1914, he first considered joining an ambulance unit in Italy but finally went to work for the Red Cross in Egypt, where he remained until the end of the war. When he returned to England in 1919 he worked for the government in various capacities, then became a journalist. He had come to think that his career as novelist was over. In 1921 he went back to India to work for the ruler of the State of Dewas. The following year he returned to England, having begun work on a new novel, which was to become *A Passage to India*, published in 1924. In 1926 he was invited to give the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge: they were afterwards published as *Aspects of the Novel*. As a result of their success he was offered a three-year fellowship at King's College. In 1928, then, Forster was known as a writer and broadcaster, who had a strong interest in public affairs. Two collections of his essays, reviews and broadcast talks, *Abinger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy*, were published in 1936 and 1951. Although his reputation as a novelist grew, he wrote no more novels. After the Second World War he was invited to live in King's College, Cambridge. He lived there until the end of his life, writing no more novels but producing, in 1953 *The Hill of Devi*, an account of his experiences in India, and in 1956 *Marianne Thornton*, a biography of his great-aunt. After his death in 1970 a long-unpublished novel *Maurice* on the theme of homosexuality was published.

2 READING *HOWARDS END*

Howards End is not an easy novel to understand unless the reader begins to notice the trail of clues Forster has laid to guide him. In his book, *Aspects of the Novel*, (1927) Forster distinguished 'the story' from 'the novel', explaining that these two elements of a work of fiction correspond to two components of everyday life. In the second chapter of his book he says:

daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives – the life in time and the life in values – and our conduct reveals a double allegiance. 'I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it'. There you have both allegiances in a simple sentence. And what the story does is to narrate the life in time. And what the entire novel does – if it is a good novel – is to include the life by values as well; using devices hereafter to be examined.

Some novelists have attended to the second of these elements of fiction by intervening directly to tell their readers what their characters think and what their readers should think too. Other novelists, like Forster, have preferred a more indirect approach. They want to involve the reader more actively in the interpretation of the novel. They do not intervene in the action with direct commentary; they allow events to unfold before the eyes of their readers who are expected to make their own assessment of the actions of the characters. As the reader will soon discover, Forster is not completely detached from the novel. There is anarrative commentary which is sometimes extensive. There are two points to notice about it: first, it is often difficult to pin down. The narrative voice is sometimes oblique, evasive or ironic, so that the reader must pause for a moment to judge its tone and take stock of its meaning. The second point is that the narrative voice sometimes merges imperceptibly into the inner thoughts of the character from whose point of view the story

is being told. The reader has to be careful to distinguish statements and comments which are made with the full authority of the narrator from statements of belief and judgement made by individual characters, which are open to consideration by the reader.

Exploring the world of values is a complex operation. In the lives that they live through time, characters discover and create values. Their choice of friends or lovers or pursuits or jobs indicates the values to which they are committed. Of course, these values may change. Characters may discover that they have made the wrong choices. The interest of the novel will lie in following their courses of action to see what principles of action they discover and how they distinguish right decisions from wrong, desirable from undesirable courses of action.

But in allowing the reader freedom to follow the action with relatively little overt authorial guidance, Forster is careful to offer guidance of a less obvious kind. He does this by constructing patterns within the material of the novel which may steer the reader towards an interpretation of it which is in accordance with the novelist's own view. In *Howards End* Forster tells a story which has many conventional features: in the 'life of time' his characters form plans and undertake actions which have happy or unhappy consequences. At a simple level the reader is invited to consider these actions and decisions from the point of view of their 'success', although it may not be so simple to judge why they are successful, or if they are. Characters may be grouped together and compared with one another so that different ways of life or reasons for action can be looked at carefully and critically. Looked at from this point of view, the action of a novel consists in a process of complication followed by one of simplification and clarification. Contrasting groups of characters are set in motion: their conflicting actions reveal the principles which they habitually use, whether they know it or not, and by the outcome he devises for each train of events or group of characters, the author reveals his own values and persuades us to consider our own.

Just as the author may contrast the actions of the characters so that they come to form a pattern which indirectly expresses the values of the author, so too may the places in which the action takes place. Setting may express preference or value so that, for example, 'town' is opposed to 'country'. In *Howards End* the values of the characters find expression in how they think of their houses: Wickham Place is contrasted with Ducie Street; Oniton Grange is a stepping stone to Howards End. Forster is able to invest places with sudden unexpected significance so that King's Cross Station is momentarily something more than a station and St Paul's Cathedral is something less than a church. The Six Hills, which are the graves of Danish soldiers, are repeatedly used to refer to values established by history; the vine and the wych-elm of Howards End gradually acquire

associations which are offered for the reader's approval during the course of the novel.

Patterns of a similar kind may even be worked into the texture of the words the author uses to tell his story. Consider, for example, the repeated use of the word 'grey' to suggest everything that stifles and represses spontaneity and expressiveness, everything that encourages conformity and routine. Or think of Forster's use of the words 'collide' and 'collision' when he wants to speak of the chance events which bring the characters of the novel together as opposed to the word 'connect' which Forster uses when the characters are able to see some sense in these encounters or to make something significant out of them. There are many words which Forster uses in a similar way to establish the 'rhythm' of his novel – an expression he uses himself for the pattern in time which is set up when a reader begins to notice these repetitions in the process of reading the novel. Forster calls this method of composition 'repetition with variation'.

Forster treats other paired words in a similar way. They are usually abstract words whose meaning is not wholly clear-cut. The repetition is not the dull duplication of some simple concept, though perhaps his repeated motifs may be criticised because they are not explicit enough, leaving their meaning too open to the interpretation of the reader. We can think of such terms as 'the seen' and 'the unseen', 'the beast' and 'the monk', 'the warp' and 'the woof' of life – money being the first of these, other things ('culture', perhaps) being the second. All of these phrases have to be placed at some point on the familiar line which runs between 'the material' and 'the spiritual'. What the first set of terms means is clear enough: money, houses, possessions, sex, family, economy and empire are all words which would find a convenient place at one end of the scale. It might be more difficult to suggest the terms which would be appropriate for the other: friendship, honesty, a love of natural things and a concern for their preservation, a desire to see all the aspects of life as part of a unified whole. Some of these qualities might appear at the 'spiritual' end of the scale. There would be a place for music, though none, apparently, for God. The position of books appears uncertain.

Perhaps one reason for Forster's use of vagueness is that he is engaged in re-ordering and re-arranging our ideas of what is spiritually significant. It is perfectly reasonable for him to do so, but the reader should be alert to the fact that such a revaluation is going on. It is surely right not to be too easily persuaded to look at life in Forster's way. Another range of repeated words seems to refer to concepts which are not subject to revaluation in this way. Words such as 'Infinity', 'Death', 'Love', 'Joy' seem to point to more general themes of human experience or human speculation. 'Love' and 'Joy' suggest the positive pole of human experience, 'Death' the negative. 'Infinity' suggests the mystery which surrounds any attempt to unite

them in a meaningful way. 'Only connect' is the epigraph of the novel, but what is to be connected and does such an event take place in the course of the novel? Reading *Howards End* with an alertness to the contrasts and oppositions which Forster has established at the level of character, setting, theme, and language will help the reader to decide whether he has found a pattern which convincingly resolves these questions.

3 SUMMARIES AND CRITICAL

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1

Summary

In a letter to her sister Margaret, Helen Schlegel writes from Howards End to describe the house and the Wilcox family who own it. The house is old and large, covered with a vine, set among trees, with a wych-elm apparently overhanging it. Helen had not expected it to be so simple because the Wilcoxes were rich and perhaps a little ostentatious. Margaret has had to stay at home with their brother, Tibby, who has hay-fever. Charles Wilcox has hay-fever too, but he is brave about it. Helen describes Mrs Wilcox as she tends her garden, unaffected by the hay, whereas Charles and his father have begun to sneeze. Three days later Helen writes again to say how happy she is with the Wilcoxes, even if they do not have her advanced views. Mr Wilcox has made Helen less sure of her opinions. A third letter briefly reports that Helen has fallen in love with the younger son, whom she has only just met.

Commentary

The novel opens with charming informality: the tone of its first sentence suggests that the narrator treats both his subject and his audience with a touch of wry detachment. Helen's letter begins with the character and setting of Howards End which are to acquire such significance during the course of the novel. It introduces the central question of the book: what are Schlegels to think of Wilcoxes? The first chapter tells through Helen's letters the story of a complete episode which is to the novel as a whole as an embryo to a mature adult. It opens with Helen's reversal of assumptions the sisters made

when they first met the Wilcoxes. It develops with Helen's apparent intellectual defeat as she submits to the stronger opinions of Mr Wilcox and ends with her falling in love with the younger son of the family.

Helen is a woman with 'advanced' opinions for 1910. She has strong and clear opinions of her own, but she is obviously impulsive and enjoys being swept off her feet. She also seems to enjoy entering imaginatively into the lives of others. But there are traces in her letters of contradictions which will be developed later in the novel. Compared with her own brother, the Wilcox men are admirably strong; but they suffer from hay-fever, unlike Mrs Wilcox who enjoys smelling hay. She enjoys the strength of the Wilcoxes, even when Mr Wilcox is knocking her opinions to pieces, but she refers to them as 'a clan', to the house, when they are all there, as 'a rabbit warren', and it may be wondered whether 'living like fighting cocks' is a complete recipe for a good life. And how comfortably do the traces of earlier ways of life – 'a tomb with trees in it, a hermit's house' – consort with the tennis, cricket and bridge of comfortable, middle-class Edwardian England?

CHAPTER 2

Summary

Margaret Schlegel receives the news of Helen's love affair as she breakfasts in London with her aunt. She explains they met the Wilcoxes when they were on holiday in Germany, although she knows little about them. She loves her sister and wants to be with her but she cannot go because her brother is ill. Aunt Juley, who thinks of herself as a practical person, offers to go instead. Margaret urges her to speak only to Helen about the matter. She sees her off to the station and returns to find a telegram from Helen informing her that the affair is over.

Commentary

From now on the commentary of the narrator assumes a crucial significance. Forster's narrative technique combines dramatised conversations, whose meaning may not be immediately obvious, with a commentary which is subtly elusive. In the first conversation between Margaret and Aunt Juley we notice the disparity between the speakers. Margaret is reticent and sceptical; her aunt is determined and downright. She thinks she is practical and clear-headed. Her