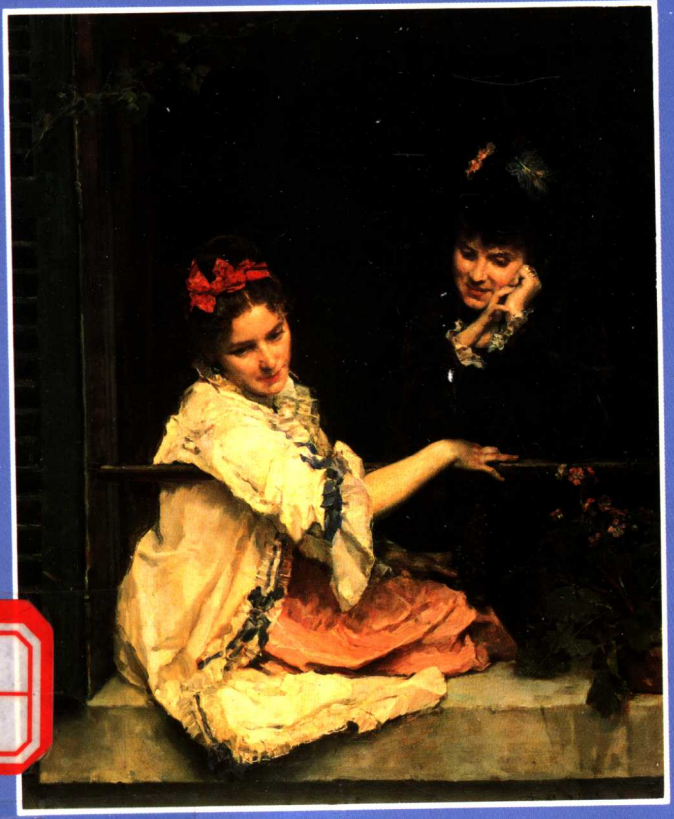
A Room with a View by E. M. Forster



With an Introduction by Mona Simpson

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E. M. Forster

Edward Morgan Forster was born January 1, 1879, in London and was raised from infancy by his mother and paternal aunts after his father's death. Forster's boyhood experiences at the Tonbridge School, Kent, were an unpleasant contrast to the happiness he found at home, and his suffering left him with an abiding dislike of the English public school system. At King's College, Cambridge, however, he was able to pursue freely his varied interests in philosophy, literature, and Mediterranean civilization, and he soon determined to devote his life to writing.

His first two novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *The Longest Journey* (1907), were both poorly received, and it was not until the publication of *Howards End*, in 1910, that Forster achieved his first major success as a novelist, with the work many consider his finest creation.

Forster first visited India during 1912 and 1913, and after three years as a noncombatant in Alexandria, Egypt, during World War I and several years in England, he returned for an extended visit in 1921. From those experiences came his most celebrated novel, *A Passage to India*, his darkest and most probing work and perhaps the best novel about India written by a foreigner.

As a man of letters, Forster was honored during and after World War II for his resistance to any and all forms of tyranny and totalitarianism, and King's College awarded him a permanent fellowship in 1946. Forster spent his later years at Cambridge writing and teaching, and died at Coventry, England, on June 7, 1970. His novel *Maurice*, written several decades earlier, was published posthumously in 1971.

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Introduction

Born on January 1, 1879, E.M. Forster lived until 1970. He had a long, long life. He saw Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun*; he traveled the Grand Canyon by mule at age sixty-eight; he was interviewed for *The Paris Review*. He was a close friend of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and read about Dorothy Parker saying, "Why, I'd go on my hands and knees to get to Forster."[1] He divested his own stocks from a South African mining company after a trip there in 1929 and, through his "Time and Tide" columns in the newspaper, publicly encouraged others to make sure they were not financing endeavors they didn't believe in "directly,"[2] as he put it. He lived and wrote through both world wars. He saw the birth of an independent India and the growth of American military and industrial power. More locally and more important to Forster, he saw a bit of the height and much of the decline of the British Empire in his lifetime.

During the First World War, Forster wrote that England was "tighter and tinier and shinier than ever—a very precious little party . . . but most insistently an island and there are times when one longs to sprawl over continents as formerly."[3] In a letter written from India, after seeing Hindu, Moslem, and British ruins, Forster wrote that "a civilization, however

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[1]Dorothy Parker. *Writers at Work, The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. by Malcolm Cowley, Vol. One, Dorothy Parker Interview (New York: Viking, 1957), p. 79.

[2]P.N. Furbank. *E.M. Forster, A Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 190.

[3]Ibid, p. 18.

silly, is touching as soon as it passes away."[4] It is difficult to place Forster's work in a period. In *A Room with a View*, for example, carriages, motorcars, and Mr. Beebe's bicycle all seem plausible enough modes of transportation in the Surrey Hills.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, a remarkable collection of lectures Forster delivered at Cambridge in 1927 (by which time, in fact, he had already completed and published all the novels he would finish and see to print in his lifetime), Forster asks his audience to try to imagine all writers in one room, writing their novels at once. He implies that time and circumstance are only what they are, peripheral, incidental, not central to an idiosyncratic genius, or—a word Forster would have preferred—to character. "All through history," he says in the first of those extraordinary lectures (which caused F.R. Leavis to walk out in disgust), "writers while writing have felt more or less the same. . . . we may say that History develops, Art stands still."[5]

To support his whimsical claim, Forster selected passages written by writers of kindred temperaments who lived continents and centuries apart, and put them side by side. He paired Henry James and Samuel Richardson, Virginia Woolf and Lawrence Sterne, Charles Dickens and H.G. Wells.

If I were to subject a passage from *A Room with a View* to this method, the closest I could come would be a pairing with a passage from Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, which is an ocean, if not a century, away. I would print the paragraphs in which Archer's fiancée offers to release him (thereby acquiring a stature she would seldom again equal), alongside of Lucy's breakup with Cecil. Though to very different ends—Lucy breaks with Cecil forever; Archer, weaker, goes ahead with his marriage—both scenes yield a similar and unexpected effect, a lesser person's temporary rise to a sort of grandeur through the visible acceptance of their lover's rejection.

During the lecture concerning character in this same series, Forster made an even wilder suggestion. Not only should his audience picture all writers in his circular reading room of the British Library scribbling away together, but we should

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[4]Ibid, p. 101.

[5]E.M. Forster. *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harvest Books, 1927), p. 21.

also allow their characters to roam freely into one another's books.

"Put Tom Jones or Emma or even Mr. Casaubon into a Henry James book and the book will burn to ashes, whereas we could put them into one another's books and cause only local inflammation."[6] More interesting than the point Forster makes about Henry James—I'm not even sure he is correct about James: before the ending of *A Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer could travel, so perhaps, could Maisie—is his notion of the lives of characters outside the books they originate in. He tries to convince that temperamental affinity may have little to do with chronological time.

In this view, Marquez, Babel, and Kafka could swap characters, as could Faulkner, Woolf, and Joyce, or Eliot, Austen, Proust, and Forster. And still—as the cheese stands alone—so does poor Henry James, who, according to Forster, could perhaps only tinker with the patterning of a story like "An Artist of the Beautiful."

This transplantation, looking at characters outside their context, seems typical of Forster. One thinks of young girls lying on couches discussing which men they would marry. Pierre definitely. Or Mr. Darcy. Swann—close, but no. Lydgate, whom they never would have ruined. One could imagine Forster picking his favorites too. He wasn't afraid to *use* literature (for life) the way his Honeychurches use their house, their good clothes, frankly and conscientiously, for pleasure. They don't feign indifference, and like them, Forster is not afraid to play.

So, though Henry James and D.H. Lawrence lived and wrote a full generation earlier than Forster, it is Forster's characters, not theirs, who could wander relatively harmlessly into Middlemarch or Freshitt Hall or several of Jane Austen's parishes. There is a slight homage to Eliot in Mr. Beebe's comment that when he was young, he "wanted to write a History of Coincidence." Comparing kind, genial Mr. Beebe and his "History of Coincidence" to Mr. Casaubon's dour, daily work on the "Key to All Mythologies" gives us some idea of the guiding sensibilities behind each of these two worlds and the tonal range between them. Forster's is mostly

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[6]Ibid, p. 161.

afternoon, sunny or cloudy, but always the hours between one P.M. and sundown. Eliot stays up all night, into the dark hours when time snaps and breaks in pieces on the cold floor. . . .

Yet this disparity is not one of realism. As we said, the Miss Alans and the Emersons could visit Tipton Grange. Miss Lavish could have her bicycle accident there and would no doubt receive better hospitality. (One could wonder too long . . . about George Emerson, for example. Might he not have made a more suitable match than Will for Dorothea?) Lucy, with only a few adjustments (and hopefully not on a day when she is wearing the unfortunate cerise frock), could meet Emma—that is, if society and chance allowed it. For, of course, we are explicitly told of Lucy's humble origins—the daughter of a provincial solicitor, who grew up in a cube with an attached turret. Forster's tone is so much that of a chronicler of village life that one is almost shocked when a car drives by Summer Street or when one hears a phrase tinged with a modernist view of architecture. But in *A Room with a View*, especially, Forster seems to be writing about the last party, the end of a world in which characters could wander into the moral universe of Eliot and Austen. Perhaps that is the tone D. H. Lawrence meant when he wrote Forster, in a letter from Baden Baden, "To me, you are the last Englishman."[7] Christopher Isherwood echoed this, during World War II, when he wrote "*My* 'England' is E.M.; the antiheroic hero, with his straggly straw mustache, his light gay blue baby-eyes and his elderly stoop. . . . He and his books and what they stand for are all that is truly worth saving from Hitler; and the vast majority of people on this island aren't even aware that he exists."[8]

Written when Forster was very young and published when he was only twenty-nine (long before he was anyone's "England" or "last Englishman"), *A Room with a View* is narrated in a sensible but susceptible voice. The book is saturated with mild irony and an expectant sense of awe. There is something very cozy about the novel. Forster often takes slightly offbeat angles on his subjects. Although—obstensibly—*A*

[7]Furbank, op cit., p. 163.
[8]Ibid, p. 229.

Room with a View is a love story of the romantic and marital variety, it is really about a much more maligned and fragile thing—middle-class family love, its tenuous balance of languor and comfort, holding lightly against the threats of sexuality and social advancement, embodied by life in the city. Later, in *A Passage to India*, friendship is the medium for the majestic passion, the grand failure.

Lucy, at the center of *A Room with a View*, is a fetching and original creation. It is to Forster's great credit that he made Lucy no better than she is. In music and in life, she "strikes no more right notes than was suitable for one of her age and situation." (A line reminiscent of Thorton Wilder's drawling "You're pretty enough for all normal purposes" in *Our Town*)[9]

And that's about what Lucy is. "Miss Honeychurch, disjoined from her music-stool, was only a young lady with a quantity of dark hair and a very pretty, pale, undeveloped face. She loved going to concerts, she loved stopping with her cousin, she loved iced coffee and meringues."

Though we believe in Lucy's beauty, as in her soul, it is rarely mentioned and never mythologized. She is an ordinary girl, not above her environment. She is, for example, no Dorothea. She is familiar, familiar enough so we see her daily and, like her own brother, find ourselves blind to her beauty and strength, which have been collecting and accreting gradually. Lucy's taste is commonplace: "she extended her uncritical approval to every well-known name." Though she feels inchoate pangs, she has no "system of revolt." For a long time, her greatest expressions of freedom are the adamant (but private) complaint, "Why were most big things unladylike?" and ejaculations such as "I hate him," which causes her fiancé (her "fiasco" in the family lingo) to shudder.

Photographs of relatives and parents, even if taken when they were young, verging on life, in their teens and twenties, stiffly sitting for the photographer, a ribboned dog tense on their laps, tend to make their subjects look older than they actually were and certainly, in any case, older than we are. It is hairstyles and frippery. But so, usually, is this the case with the characters in novels of our parents' and ancestors'

[9]Thornton Wilder. *Our Town*, (New York: Avon, 1957), p. 42.

time. Dorothea and even Rosamund and Emma and Odette and Swann all seem older than we feel (or felt) at their ages. (Dorothea is "not yet twenty" at the opening of *Middlemarch*. A teenager!) It is as if not only matronly hairstyles, buttoned boots, and aprons emphasized adulthood, but so did specific peculiar moral complexions.

Yet Lucy Honeychurch seems her own age. There is something mobile, uneven about her. She is sometimes lovely, "got up smart," in her own words, in whites—somehow we know that is her color, but she will not stick to it. We see her at home lounging in tennis clothes, no doubt grass stained from the lawn, looking wan in the cerise frock, which, though a failure, she nonetheless wears through her Sunday morning. "She dressed so unevenly," good Mr. Beebe cannot help but think, "—oh, that cerise frock yesterday."

We see Lucy's good days and bad days. And though we are privy to her flights, Forster won't let us forget that her life, like our own, is mired in mundanities. At a tea party, when a cup of coffee is spilled over Lucy's figured silk, "though Lucy feigned indifference, her mother feigned nothing of the sort but dragged her indoors to have the frock treated by a sympathetic maid." One gets the feeling that in Cecil Vyse's (the fiasco's) London if coffee were spilled on figured silk—either Lucy's or the superior figured silk on a grandchild of someone famous—no such amends would be made.

Forster resists the glamour of a fictional world where coffee isn't spilled. We see Windy Corner and those "Honeychurch ways" that so grate on Cecil's nerves. Forster gives us middle-class Honeychurches who live in a cube with an attached turret, who worry over clothes, who fear disasters with the meat and broken boilers, who sit in the dark to save the furniture, and asks us to see beauty not in their taste or their refinement but in their humanity, their affection for each other, their kindness. After all, "the late Mr. Honeychurch had affected the cube, because it gave him the most accommodation for his money." In this unromantic atmosphere of compromise, the Honeychurch values and Cecil Vyse's London aesthetics are played out against each other in Lucy.

"Make her one of us," the mechanized Mrs. Vyse says to Cecil before she processed (what a wonderfully placed verb)

to bed. Forster is brilliant on Mrs. Vyse. "Mrs. Vyse was a nice woman, but her personality, like many another's, had been swamped by London, for it needs a strong head to live among many people. The too vast orb of her fate had crushed her; and she had seen too many seasons, too many cities, too many men, for her abilities."

The Vyses bring Lucy into London to train her, if you will, during the off season. At Mrs. Vyse's dinner party "the food was poor, but the talk had a witty weariness that impressed the girl. One was tired of everything, it seemed." Yet, ghastly as this city life sounds, its lures are true and they tell in Lucy. "Lucy saw that her London career would estrange her a little from all that she had loved in the past." A little!

The Windy Corner pitted against this ascendant life is one of average, standard furniture, normal good manners, conventional comforts. Forster beautifully paints the languor of summer days, of old clothes, of a game of bumble-puppy, which one did not play when Cecil was around. Freddy, lying on the grass, grabs his sister's ankles with both hands. The minister's niece screeches, bobbing the ball in the air with a racket. It is a long afternoon of family life, daily pleasures, a quality of light we have all known.

Cecil "considered the bone [a prop for Freddy's anatomy studies] and the Maples' furniture separately." Together, Forster claims "they kindled the room into the life that he desired."

But we know the story. Today, in the Andean region of rural Peru, a girl will run down the road to stare in the windows of a tour bus. If she has a transistor radio, she will hear American songs; she will end up in a pueblo jovene, a Lima slum. The rural vision lapses and lists toward the urban. It is the story of our century, full of holes and losses, its prominent tone one of rue.

Perhaps one reason *A Room with a View* is so fetching and always fresh is that what is left of the rural, in the suburban, is not for a minute sentimentalized—no agrarian wish this suburban house with its maple drawing room furniture—and yet it wins! In Lucy it wins. It feels as if the course of the twentieth century has been flipped over. No wonder D.H. Lawrence saw Forster as "the last Englishman."

Lucy's choice is one of deeper sympathy. We have already been told, much earlier, that the cottage Mr. Emerson rents is an aesthetic blot on Summer Street, on, in fact, the whole neighborhood. We may begin, in fact, by hoping that the ghastly cottages ("Sir Harry hinted that a column, if possible, should be structural as well as decorative") will be torn down. But, by the novel's end, so much has happened, and when Lucy cries to Mr. Emerson "Don't leave your comfortable house," there is not an ounce of irony in the line. She has learned that it *is* a comfortable house. She has come to love George partly through his care and affection, his painful love, for his father. It is a deep chord. Our Lucy has grown to care about other people in a way that includes their pains, their limited incomes, their sadness.

Benjamin DeMott wrote, in an introduction to another of Forster's books, "About social existence, E.M. Forster knew everything."[10] He is especially good with "maiden ladies," "nervous old maids," "fallen gentlewomen"—call them what you will—and the celibate single man who studies them. I think it is fair to say these are unusual subjects, an odd slant, not the usual roundup. Their allegorical names—Eager, Lavish, Vyse, and the more noble Emersons and Honeychurches—only suggest beginnings. Even the minor characters grow, capable of surprising us. The charming cameos from the Pension Bertolini in Italy bob up again in England, where they take bike trips into each other's neighborhoods, where their published books find their way into each other's hands.

And the indubitable Miss Alans "did go to Greece, but they went by themselves. They alone of this little company will double Malea and plough the waters of the Saronic gulf. . . . Trembling, anxious, cumbered with much digestive bread, they did proceed to Constantinople, they did go around the world."

Not everyone, even in this novel, has the patience for these spinsters and gentlewomen that Forster and Mr. Beebe do. "They are certain to have canaries," insists Mrs. Honeychurch,

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[10]Benjamin DeMott. Introduction to *A Room with a View* and *Howards End*, by E.M. Forster, (New York: Signet Classics, 1986), p. v.

a solid woman who would prefer someone coming up in the world to these already-fallens.

But Mr. Beebe appreciates them. "Isn't romance capricious! I never notice it in you young people; you do nothing but play lawn tennis and say that romance is dead while the Miss Alans are struggling with all the weapons of propriety against the terrible thing."

Forster's ear is pitch-perfect, and his narrative voice in playful control. "Well, dear, I at all events am ready for Bedfordshire," says the enigmatic Charlotte—the ultimate spinster—for all the pensioners to hear.

"Have you told him about him yet?" she asks Lucy later.

Still later, "Willingly would I move heaven and earth—"

"I want something more definite," Lucy demands, on to her.

Forster knows so much about our lives with other people.

"Why does anyone tell anything? The question is eternal and it was not surprising that Miss Barlett could only sigh faintly in response."

Or: "Lucy soothed him and tinkered at the conversation in a way that promised well for their married peace."

He is good at painting palpable failure. Even more chilling than the failed kiss is Lucy and Cecil's meeting, later, in London:

" 'So do you love me, little thing?' . . .

'Oh, Cecil, I do, I do! I don't know what I should do without you.'

Several days passed."

Similarly, it would be hard to imagine a severer cut than Forster's to Cecil on page 96. "And he swept off on the subject of fences again, and was brilliant." The next paragraph quotes Mrs. Honeychurch's long response word for word.

Cecil more than once stared at Lucy and "felt again she had failed to be Leonardesque." Those who have reservations about Forster tend to focus on his social vision. I have a British friend who hates Forster for the line, "It was impossible to snub someone so gross."

Other lines, too, might offend: "But, after all, what have we to do with taverns. Real menace belongs to the drawing

room," or the milder, "cheap mosaic brooches, which the maids, next Christmas, would never tell from real." But I would contend that these words represent an attitude embodied in Charlotte, which is defensive, partially toppled in the end. Expressing such raw prejudice or a racist viewpoint in fiction is always a sort of bravery.

We know it is not Forster's own belief. Because Forster refuses to make his heroes any kind of fallen nobility. The older Mr. Emerson was a journalist, George works as a clerk for the railway. And George, with our full consent, gets our Lucy, (herself the daughter of a solicitor). Besides, the Emersons own the most lovable eccentricity in the book. It is a piece of furniture, resonant with their unlanded state. "On the cornice of the wardrobe, the hand of an amateur had painted this inscription: 'Mistrust all enterprises that require new clothes.' "

One cannot close a discussion of *A Room with a View* without mentioning its ending. That Lucy must end with George feels and becomes exhilaratingly inevitable, and in substance, one wants to love the ending with a kind of exuberant sigh. However, in point of literal fact, the final five pages seem the most flat and lackluster in the book.

While, strictly speaking, there is nothing wrong with lines like "Ah! it was worth while; it was the great joy that they had expected and countless little joys of which they had never dreamt," or with George putting his face in her lap—they do not, here, seem enough.

As one might wish William James to step in to color more specific religious tints, a brushstroke of depth and variation on the spiritual natures of the characters—perhaps Charlotte's with an ascetic streak, Mr. Beebe's shallow, but kind, the once-born—one might also wish Chekhov or Joyce to lean over from their spots in the circular reading room, in their advanced ages, and help twenty-eight-year-old Forster with his ending. For while *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* have, in turn, a calm, perfect, irregularly resolved close and a majestic, glorious, transcendent ending (both afternoons!), the close of *A Room with a View* seems a bit immature.

Whereas throughout the book, up until then, the sexual tones seemed quite convincing, their consummation falters. (Later, Forster would say "you could only depict people enjoying making love if it was within a framework of tragedy.")[11] But, then, Forster didn't yet understand full-out sexual intimacy and passion at the time he finished *A Room with a View*.

In his wonderful biography, P.N. Furbank tells us that Forster's mother had "made no attempt at any stage to tell Morgan the 'facts of life.' During his first term at Kent House he formulated his own theory of them, which was that 'lying together' meant that a man placed his stomach against a woman's and it was a crisis when he warmed her; and on his return from holiday he knew what 'committing adultery' meant. She looked worried and replied, 'so you understand now how dreadful it would be to mention it, especially if a gentleman was there.' For some years this remained more or less the total of his knowledge of the facts of life. Indeed, he said later that it was not until he was thirty, by which time he had published three novels, that he altogether understood how copulation took place."[12]

Though the book is dedicated to H.O.M. (Hugh Meredith, Forster's first important love) and the character of George based on him, he and Forster had not advanced physically past the stage of Lucy and George in the Italian violets. Perhaps Forster later realized the ending to be a slight weakness. He said in his Cambridge lectures that, "If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude."[13] (Nor the average person for that matter.) Whereas *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* end very differently, the conclusion of a *A Room with a View* does fall into one of these described barrels. "This is the inherent defect of novels: they go off at the end."[14]

Forster used people from his world and life as models for characters in *A Room with a View*. Forster modeled Charlotte

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[11]Furbank, op. cit., p. 302.
[12]Furbank, op. cit., p. 37.
[13]Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 95.
[14]Ibid, p. 96.

on a very pathetic aunt (Emily), and he would gleefully exclaim, "None of them saw it!"[15]

According to Furbank, Forster's beloved grandmother Louisa was Mrs. Honeychurch; he cast his own lover, H.O.M., as George Emerson; old Mr. Emerson was probably based on Samuel Butler.

In 1901, when he was twenty-two and had just finished Cambridge, Forster took his first trip abroad, to Italy. Naturally (for them), his mother went along. Neither of them seem to have considered any other possible alternatives. Forster's thoughts in Italy seemed to have been much the same as Lucy Honeychurch's.

There he met the original for Ms. Lavish, an Emily Spender, who wrote romantic novels (*Romance of Perugia*) and turned out to be the great-aunt of Stephen Spender. Forster's life *was* the last Englishman's!

While writing the novel, he told a friend "I wish you would quickly inhabit your new house—I want it for some people of mine; they are living there at present in the greatest discomfort, not knowing which way the front door opens or what the view is like, and till I go there to tell them they will never get straight. If you would also provide one of them with something to do and something to die of I should also be grateful!"[16]

A Room with a View came out on the 14th of October in 1908, when Forster was twenty-nine, soon to be thirty. It was received with good reviews, the *Daily Mail* calling the characters as "clear and salient as a portrait by Sargent." There was only one rude review from *Outlook*. It is worth quoting only to solace contemporary novelists for the treachery of reviewers. I believe it to be so wholly and foolishly and, in the long view of time, obviously wrong.

"The heroine is one of those uncomfortable girls who cannot make up their minds. She is kissed on all possible occasions, and without provocation, by the uncouth George Emerson, and these osculatory overtures as often unsettle her intentions. We do not share the disquiet of her family when at

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[15]Furbank, op. cit., p. 65.
[16]Ibid, op. cit., p. 120.