

H o w a r d s E n d

By: E.M. Forster

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Forster's examination of contemporaneous issues pervades the novel in multifarious layers. What is your response to this statement?

'Only connect...'



Howards End is E.M. Forster's symbolic exploration of the social, economic, and philosophical conditions in Edwardian culture. Written in 1910, at a time when Britain's industrial ascendancy was dwindling, and Germany's expansion filling the vacuum, socio-political Anglo-German relations were particularly volatile, culminating in the Entente Cordiale in 1904. Although *Howards End* is a "fin de siècle" novel it lacks the European rational elucidation found in similar novels at the time, like Thomas Mann's "The White Mountain". Thus, Forster set out to address the question critic Lionel Trilling posed, "Who shall inherit England?"¹

With reference to the above question, Forster explores the milieu of three dissimilar groups in society, each of which epitomizes a particular social class-consciousness: the literary, cultural Schlegel family, who symbolize the idealistic and intellectual aspect of the upper classes; the materialistic, pragmatic Wilcox family, who embody the "unyielding" English work ethic, bourgeoisie, and conventional social morality; and the impoverished Bast family, headed by a lower-middle-class insurance clerk who earnestly believes books, such as Ruskin, will salvage him from social and economic desolation. Forster's fascination for Hegelian opposites permeates the novel throughout; hence the dichotomy between the working class and the nouveau-riche, middleclass values and labour class destitution and the liaison between the rural environment and urban isolation.

To evoke the recurrent themes that are incessantly inferred right the way through the novel, I think it optimal to examine a specific scene. The attendance to the music hall in Chapter V. A noteworthy observation is that, the characters in *Howards End* and for that matter in any manuscript are merely fictitious personas of the author's imagination. As Ian Milligan writes "*Howards End* is about a search for values... the novel means more than the desirability of finding a mean..." The novel for the most part is written from Margaret's viewpoint, that point of view is not Margaret's though; it is Forster, propagating *his* sentiments and using Margaret solely as a mouthpiece.

Sisters Margaret and Helen Schlegel are sitting side-by-side, listening to Beethoven's platonic Fifth Symphony. Margaret, the more pragmatic of the two, delights in its music, Helen on the contrary, attempts to unearth its deeper meaning. Besides from the Schlegel

¹ Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster* (Norfolk, Conn., 1943)

girls representing a bridge uniting disparate social classes through the narrative structure, they also symbolize a quest for unity and reciprocity between man and woman.

Mrs. Munt, the aunt of the two sisters comments “I do not go in for being musical; I only care for music – a very different thing.”² She takes pleasure in it merely “as a tune to tap along to”. Leonard Bast, only recently acquainted to Margaret is unable to benefit from the music, as he is too fretful on the mundane activities around him. “Leonard listened to it with reverence. He felt that he was being done good to, and that if he kept on with Ruskin, and the Queens Hall’s concerts, and some pictures by Watts, he would one day push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe.”³

Leonard is one of the characters in the novel who “cannot connect”. He is a social-climber, confined to the deprivation of his depressing abode. He aspires of becoming refined as the Schlegel girls by reading Ruskin. Forster in this respect illustrates; that to be considered upper class in Edwardian culture, one must be born into it.

Tibby, the brother of the Schlegel girls is “dyspeptic and difficle”⁴, he takes the music for its sheer technical brilliance. He represents the ‘bored’ cerebral class. His inability to communicate is the thesis throughout the novel Forster viciously deplures. On a simpler note, Forster, a Cambridge student himself, might be allocating scorn on the ‘Oxford mentality’ for their staunchness in learning and inability to ‘connect’, hence the maxim “The dreaming spires of Oxford”.

Frieda Mosebach, the Schlegel’s cousin from Germany is also present. She out of the entire German delegation has the only sensible reaction to the music. Her foremost concern is that Beethoven is “echt Deutsche”, a “true German”⁵ and impossible for universal conscious integration.

Forster writes about Beethoven’s music, that it can be enjoyed by “All sorts and conditions”⁶, whatever their nationality, background or personality. Margaret rejected her dual-nationality to inhibit her yearning for culture.

The affiliation between Britain and Germany is conspicuously paraded in this scene. There is no explicit connection between the historical circumstance and the activity in *Howards End*. Though with some certainty I wholesomely concede there *was* an implicit linkage with the capricious international situation. Queen Victoria maintained good relations with the Germans, especially because the Kaiser was her nephew. Edward, her successor, endorsed a policy to counteract the colossal expansion of Germany. This culminated in an impassioned xenophobia in both Britain and Germany. The epigraph ‘Only connect...’ Forster utilized may hint for his desire for interaction and co-operation between the two countries. The Schlegel’s are part German. Their father immigrated to England as a result of the unification of Germany in 1871 and the Pan-German league, which was designed to amalgamate the smaller German states to Prussia. Thus, Helen, because of her dual nationality felt liberated to take flight to Germany. Forster alludes to the expansionist realms of Germany as “a commercial power... a naval power... with colonies here and a forward policy there, and legitimate aspirations in the other place.”⁷

² Chapter V (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 51)

³ Chapter VI (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 62)

⁴ Chapter IV (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 44)

⁵ Chapter V (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 49)

⁶ Chapter V (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 44)

⁷ Chapter IV (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 42)

Subsequently it is befitting that Mr. Wilcox's corporation should be the Imperial and West Africa Company, and that Paul Wilcox should be employed in Nigeria. For Mrs. Munt's jingoism to repudiate the Schlegel's German side "of course I regard you Schlegel's as English, English to the backbone" was the focus of Forster's criticism. It was this kind of attitude which gravitated the situation irreversibly, until the world would be compelled into war.

Forster's characters originated from a forum he regularly attended, whose members are probably incorporated in the novel. This forum became known as the Bloomsbury set. It comprised of the renowned writers, critics and economists; J.M. Keynes, G.E. Moore, Clive Bell and Virginia Woolf. Its purpose was to provide ideas for the betterment of society. This assembly bore a resemblance to the socialist inclined intellectualised 'Fabian Society' founded by: the Webb's, G.B. Shaw, H.G. Wells and G. Wallace for the enrichment of the *working* class. They pioneered a model for intellectual ambience, most significantly, membership was not heritable.

Forster explores the symbolic value of other objects and ideas, including the efficacy of money. Examples like; "The visible and the invisible", "the seen and the unseen", "the prose and passion". Persistently contrasting the "seen" with the "unseen" - the physical, material world of the Wilcox's with the imaginative, spiritual world of the Schlegel's-- Forster conjectures the prospect that, ultimately, the universe has little meaning, that all of life is simply a struggle for subsistence, represented by the toil for money. This is the nucleus of Helen's realization at the performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, when she imagines "goblins" strutting across the universe, declaring human beings as inconsequential. However, Helen in time realizes that the image of death forces people to confront the idea of the "unseen" and forces them to look for meaning in their lives, "Death destroys a man: the idea of death saves him"⁸. In this regard, life is not merely a quest for money; undeniably it is an important element of life, because it enables leisure and security, but there is *more* to life. Then again, Helen appreciates this primarily because she *has* money: It does no good for the doomed Leonard Bast.

The doctrine of Social Darwinism resonates through the novel spasmodically. It is essentially, the transference of the thesis of evolution. The disparity of events involving Mr. Wilcox and Leonard is fundamentally Darwinist in nature. When Mr. Wilcox imparts bad advice about the Porphyry Corporation Leonard resigns. As a result he took office in a bank, and becomes redundant after a cutback in personnel. When confronted Mr. Wilcox audaciously claims "Its part of the battle of life"⁹. Like Leonard he is unable to connect and becomes a symbol of spiritual deprivation. The tough survive, the frail fall. Forster gave lectures to the working middle class like Leonard and he incorporated his experiences in *Howards End*. The Wilcox's and Schlegel's are not doomed but fated to survive.

Henry Wilcox epitomises the nouveau riche and the established "superman". He "doesn't care for culture" is "obtuse" and frequently disingenuous. His cosmopolitanism is

⁸ Chapter XXVII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg.236)

⁹ Chapter XXII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 192)

exploited, to express Forster's repugnance of English reticence and the English cult of masculine dignity. In reference, J.B. Bury wrote 'The idea of progress', which likens Henry Wilcox to the notion of 'perfectibility'. Margaret attempts to reconcile the opposites of materialism and spiritualism in her relationship with Henry as the "beast and the monk".

"Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon.
Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted,
And human love will be seen as its height. Live in fragments no longer.
Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of isolation that is life to either, will die"¹⁰

The ladies' conference attended by Margaret, Helen and Mrs. Wilcox, mirrored the discussions Forster participated as part of the Bloomsbury set. The topic of debate was the distribution of a deceased millionaire's assets. The general assumption of the women was the requisite to help the needy. Though Margaret and Helen's independence stimulate a slight deviation to the norm, as Margaret suggests "a scheme of 'personal supervision and mutual help' the effect of which was to ameliorate the plight of the poor people until they became exactly like people who were not so poor."¹¹ The outcome would and could never be implemented, yet the same approach was adopted by Clement Atlee's Labour government in 1946. The Schlegel's advocated enthusiastically for women's rights. The crusades of the suffragettes familiar in Forster's time was incorporated vis-à-vis *Howards End*. Nonetheless Mrs. Wilcox reclusive throughout the debate asserts "it is wiser to leave action and discussion to men"¹².

In citation of Mrs. Wilcox, she is habitually mentioned in reference to her spiritually attached house, Howards End. She became so accustomed to the house it became part of her, often recollecting its features like the "pigs teeth embedded in the log" and Eve's "wych-elm tree"¹³. As a result she wanted to bequeath it to her devoted heir, Margaret. The demolition of a home, Forster claimed, was a heinous crime. A home epitomizes stability and sanctuary without which we are vulnerable, and the demolition of Wickham Place reflects the turmoil of its tenancy. Forster emphasized the necessity of stability of a home which acts as an anchor for the viability of society existence.

Houses are not the only means that bestow a 'connecting' rhythm and linkage on the narrative. Two distinct symbols recur with a different kind of resonance; the sword and umbrella. The sword is the Schlegel's father's symbol. Briefly recounted in Chapter IV, he is described as a valiant soldier in combat against the Danes and French, and, anticipating German militaristic materialism, he emigrated from Germany to England, along with his sword. A symbol of 'honour' connects the culture and rivalry, entrenched in English tradition, but enduring idealistically in Germany. On the contrary the umbrella is a symbol of 'respectability', and is the motif of Leonard's nominal status. He carries one as part of his refined uniform. Those of superior status consider an umbrella as an

¹⁰ Chapter XXII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 188)

¹¹ Chapter XV (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 134)

¹² Chapter IX (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 87)

¹³ Chapter XXII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg. 191)

object of convenience. Helen was oblivious in depriving Leonard of his umbrella, something he sincerely regarded. Subsequently, after Leonard's ad hoc disappearance and his wife's pursuit of him, Helen candidly remarks "she asked for a husband as if he was an umbrella"¹⁴, quite unawares to the irony of her flippancy. Respectively, the sword's function is to inflict death, and it exacts retribution on Leonard by Charles Wilcox, after finding it hanging on the mantelpiece. Befittingly Leonard is struck to the bookshelf whose contents cascades all around him, and dies surrounded by the culture he so earnestly aspired to emulate in an apt climatic irony of the novel.

Charles and Dolly's wedding was innately supercilious, the guests impeccably treated, the festivities lavish and the ceremony scrupulously punctual. Their marriage in actual fact mirrored the promiscuous relationship between Henry and Jacky. The exploitation of the lower class was subliminally predominant in society, hence the nouveau riche - represented by Henry - would avail themselves at the expense of the less fortunate, in this case Jacky. As Margaret said "You have had a mistress - I forgave you. My sister has a lover - you drive her from the house." "You have betrayed Mrs. Wilcox, Helen only herself. You remain in society, Helen can't."¹⁵ In both instances the characters cannot reconcile their differences and do not satisfy the epigraph; "Only connect..." Forster is consistent in his premise to unite these two conflicting fronts, by including the relatives from Germany in the wedding.

The motorcar features strongly as part of Forster's antagonism and prescient perception of future congestion problems. Commonly associated to the Wilcox's as the "throbbing stinking car"¹⁶ Forster loathed its intrusion into urban society.

Forster's adherence to the rural ascendancy of England, complemented by his fear of urbanisation, was another paradigm behind *Howards End*. Forster's nostalgia and euphoria of the British countryside is merged with Ruth Wilcox's conservative values (as a reflection of Forster's) transmits an 'aristocracy' of the past, this in stark contrast to Margaret's liberalism. Mrs. Wilcox's mind-set on the encroaching urbanisation is hostile, criticising, if it is really worth giving up the "glory of the animal" for a "tail-coat" and a "couple of ideas". Mrs. Wilcox remained the last of the backbone of the old yeomen stock. As Jeremy Tambling¹⁷ comments "Forster's attachments are nostalgic, dwelling on a Britain which is agricultural, non-industrial, pre-motor-car." This is illustrated in Mrs. Wilcox melancholy sojourn in London, and the demolition of Wickham Place.

Critics have accused episodes in *Howards End* as being contrived, deliberately manufactured acquaintances, and too coincidental all to sensationalize the novel rather than actually propagating sentiments and criticisms close to Forster's heart. In defence, Forster resolutely asserts that the alleged contrivances are plausible like Margaret's marriage to Henry Wilcox, even though he championed chronic narcissistic introspection.

¹⁴ Chapter XIII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg.121)

¹⁵ Chapter XXXVIII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg.301)

¹⁶ Chapter III (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg.36)

¹⁷ New Casebooks: E.M. Forster ed. Jeremy Tambling

Through descriptive lyricism Forster articulates his polemical, and to an extent, satirical narrative, for example his particularly negative and pessimistic view between the antagonism of the European powers. Language is also a subject in itself which Forster explores, like the juxtaposition of Margaret's eloquent use of words, when speaking to Henry, and Jacky, for whom the "the spoken word was rare". Leonard may not be equipped with linguistic communion, yet he remains self-conscious even in the depths of "muddledom" by his capacity to say "I" in Chapter XLI, whereas, the class he belongs to is subsumed in incommunicability, like Jacky's "deafness". Complementary to the 'inaudible' lower class, Margaret's notes the "clipped words, formless sentences, potted expressions of approval or disgust"¹⁸ in urban civilisation. Thus language is not only in the narrative as an expression of the characters diversity, it is integrated by Forster within a whole social panorama, and exposed as a fundamental element of human existence.

To Forster, who believed that "the character of the English is essentially middle-class," it was people like Leonard and the Wilcox's aspiring to wealth, political power, and culture who would eventually "inherit" England, not the dying aristocratic class of the Schlegel's or the working classes. Similarly there is evidence in Robert Musil's book "A Man without Qualities" which depicts the steady decline of the Austrian-Hungarian aristocratic society's 'fin de siecle' environment. Thus Forster used Leonard's connection with the Schlegel's as the social conscience of the book. As critic Wilfred Stone wrote, "Just as [Leonard] stands on the edge of the social abyss, so he affords the Schlegel's a glimpse into it - increasing both their 'panic and emptiness'¹⁹ and their guilt over class and money."

Ultimately, *Howards End* is the most optimistic expression of Forster's unique vision, 'a meditation on the future', and a sensibility that transcends the temporal confines of his novel. Its richly drawn characters and the struggles they face - to maintain human connection in an increasingly depersonalized society, and to find a spiritual home in the world is still as current as they were at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Word Count: 2550 approx.

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¹⁸ Chapter XIII (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg.116)

¹⁹ Chapter V (Penguin Edition, edited by Oliver Stallybrass, Pg.47)

