

Close Reading of E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971)

In this passage from *Maurice* (1971), E.M. Forster problematises Maurice's avowed posture as 'a man embedded in society.'¹ While outwardly affirming his involvement in the bourgeois worlds of marriage and stockbroking, this brief telephone conversation between Maurice and Clive reveals not only an estranged interpersonal relationship between the pair, but more significantly, a distance between Maurice and "respectable" society. The intrusive authorial voice foregrounds the manifest incongruity between his homosexual desire and appearance as a worthy representative of the middle classes, and consequently a model Englishman. However, Forster's portrayal of Maurice's alienation as a result of his failure to fully 'embed' himself in society contributes to the novel's wider critique of such a narrow and superficial understanding of social respectability.

The social fabric of the novel is evoked throughout the passage as Forster establishes Maurice's proximity to polite society. His dialogue is replete with the nuptial announcements ('Mr Hill's getting married too,' 'and after him Ada to Chapman'), affirming the central role of marriage within conventional, heterosexual society.² This string of imminent weddings looming over Maurice demonstrates the pervasive and unrelenting nature of social institutions; in addition to dominating Maurice's personal schedule, these weddings demarcate the temporality of the novel. Through Clive, time is effectively delineated according to public duties, including 'that awful Park v. Village cricket match' in August before the by-election in September. Forster's characterisation of Clive as an involved, land-owning country squire asserts his embeddedness in society, strengthened by his engagement to Anne, participation in local politics, and ironic distance to his 'awful' suburban responsibilities. Indeed, Maurice is presented as actively involved in the 'chaos' of this social fabric, not merely by way of the invitation to Clive's country house at Penge, but through his deference to Maurice' position as a reliable stockbroker—he suggests that Maurice 'better choose' Anne's investment. Forster thereby presents Maurice as having an ostensibly worthy societal role, implicated in the domestic and economic concerns of "respectable" society that punctuate his daily activities and his work.

The transactional nature of this interaction, while pointing to Maurice's apparent embeddedness in conventional society, is also implicitly critiqued by Forster. The impersonal command to 'send the cheque' and his decision to 'ring off and buy at once' bring the conversation to an abrupt conclusion, reduced to little more than an advantageous business exchange. Any attempt at genuine, profound intercourse is thus superseded by economic interests. Forster's unembellished prosaic style reflects this dispassionate conversational tone through minimal narrative intrusion, consisting mostly of simple verbal phrases ('Clive resumed', 'She informed him', 'He did so'). This stylistically restrained, economical form of narration conveys the distant formality of the 'ritualised social script' adopted by

¹ All quotations from the novel are from E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (London: Penguin, 2005); 209

² All quotations of the passage are from pp. 133-134

the middle class, as explored by R.A. Buck.³ Furthermore, the use of free indirect discourse to explain Maurice's considered decision to pay 'three guineas' for a wedding present since he was 'only eighth' on the list of friends, demonstrates an awareness of the monetary value placed on social interactions, requiring him to act against his more generous 'instinct' lest he seem 'out of place.' Forster denounces the superficiality of such social conventions, including Anne's safe 'four percent' investment; Maurice's clientele is satirised later in the novel for 'invest[ing] most of [their] money at four percent' to 'speculate in a little vice—not in too much [...] but in enough to show that their virtue was sham' (194). This indictment of the conservative practices and hollow virtues of the middle classes contributes to what David Medalie considers Forster's 'trenchant criticism of aspects of the social fabric itself.'⁴ Clive and Anne exemplify the 'sham' conventionality integral to bourgeois society in which capital functions as an imperative topic of discussion as well as a superficial measure of friendship.

Moreover, the absence of intimacy in this correspondence reveals Forster's thematic concern of interpersonal relationships. The reliance on reported speech ('said Anne's voice') emphasises the removed nature of their conversation, mediated through the 'telephone wire,' and stresses Maurice's lack of substantive human connection. His dialogue with these disembodied 'voices' is marked by an inability to communicate meaningfully and intimately; their miscommunication when Anne 'didn't catch' all the names of securities quoted by Maurice denotes the distance between them, accentuated by the impersonal formality of Maurice's enquiry, 'What's your address, please?', more indicative of an encounter between strangers than intimate friends. Clive's repetition of 'by the way,' reinforces the impression of an incidental, rather than purposeful, interaction. Forster presents their 'pleasant' but distant relationship as an unsatisfactory one for Maurice, who hereafter 'always' feels as if 'they stood at the other end of the telephone wire.' Not only does this empty 'pleasantness' contrast the former closeness of their relationship in which they once 'met and realised the unity preached by Plato' (69), but their estrangement is described in association with the modern invention of the telephone. Douglas Bolling's argument that the 'thematic centre' of the novel is the 'imperative of the personal relationship [...] which transcends the formidable and dehumanising barriers of modern society,' illuminates the ways in which their changing relationship can be seen as paralleling changes brought on by modernity.⁵ This passage, preoccupied with the possibility of interpersonal connection in modern society, ultimately presents Clive and Maurice as unable to transcend the barrier of the 'telephone wire.'

Indeed, the telephone is not the only barrier between them; Maurice's distance from Clive and dislocated position in modern society are presented in relation to his homosexuality. According to

³ R.A. Buck, 'Reading Forster's Style: Face Actions and Social Scripts in *Maurice*', *Style*, 30:1 (1996), 72

⁴ David Medalie, "'A man embedded in society': Homosexuality and the 'Social Fabric' in 'Maurice' and Hollinghurst's 'The Swimming-Pool Library'", in *Twenty-First-Century Readings of E.M. Forster's "Maurice"*, eds. Emma Sutton and Tsung-Han Tsai (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 179

⁵ Douglas Bolling, 'The Distanced Heart: Artistry in E.M. Forster's "Maurice"', in *E.M. Forster: Critical Assessments*, Vol. III, ed. J.H. Stape (Helm Information, East Sussex, 1998), 425

Howard Booth, the novel is ‘carefully organised to convey Maurice’s isolation’ while nevertheless ‘depicting a network of social relations.’⁶ This characterisation of Maurice’s dual condition, both separated from society and ostensibly part of it, is confirmed by the narrative voice which highlights his double subjectivity as a homosexual. The rhetorical question that closes the passage underscores a separation between his refined public persona, elaborated with a list of adjectives, ‘quiet, honourable, prosperous without vulgarity,’ and his ‘vulgar’ homosexual desire, heightened by the violent image of Maurice ‘nearly assault[ing] a boy.’ Forster’s emphasis on reflections and surface appearance further develops the outward perception of him ‘in the glass’ as misleading—while seeming to be a ‘solid young citizen,’ this veneer of respectability is merely how ‘he looked,’ echoing previous descriptions of him as an ‘outlaw in disguise’ (118). As well as precipitating his eventual recognition of ‘a complete break between his public and private actions’ (150), this self-reflection enables a crucial acknowledgement of his perceived conformity, so convincing that his deviation is almost not ‘conceivable.’ By unveiling Maurice’s ‘disguise,’ the narrative not only elucidates the ways ‘homosexuality prevents him from being incorporated in meaningful and gratifying ways within the social fabric,’ as proposed by Medalie, but more importantly, challenges the very basis of his social exclusion.⁷

Forster implicitly questions the supposed incongruity between homosexuality and Englishness. Apart from his sexuality, Maurice is presented as the epitome of a model ‘citizen,’ with the narrative voice claiming, ‘on such does England rely.’ The novel’s consistent emphasis on Maurice’s normality, declaring ‘except on one point his temperament was normal’ (118), consolidates his status as a representative of both the middle classes and of national character, given Forster’s definition of the ‘character of the English’ as ‘essentially middle class.’⁸ In effect, Forster’s construction of Maurice as a typical, even exemplary, Englishman troubles the ‘solid’ conception of Englishness as incompatible with homosexuality. Anne Hartree sees Maurice’s main ‘quest’ in the novel as being for ‘a way of incorporating his sexuality into the English identity he sees in the mirror.’⁹ The reconciling of Maurice’s public position in “respectable” bourgeois society and concealed homosexual desire effectively necessitates a renegotiation of ‘the terms of his construction as an Englishman,’ as Hartree notes.¹⁰ However, rather than rejecting Englishness altogether, Forster’s interrogation of the dominant understanding of English citizenship, explicitly posed by the rhetorical question, maintains the possibility of ‘incorporating his sexuality’ into his identity.

⁶ Howard Booth, ‘Maurice’, in *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, ed. David Bradshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 174

⁷ Medalie, 184

⁸ Forster, ‘Notes on the English Character’, in *Literature in the Modern World*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 176

⁹ Anne Hartree, “‘A Passion that few English minds have admitted’”: Homosexuality and Englishness in E.M. Forster’s “Maurice”, *Paragraph*, 19:2 (1996), 130

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129

This passage, in examining Maurice's overt participation in bourgeois, heterosexual society, and 'out of place' instincts, exposes the arbitrary and superficial notions of English middle-class "respectability." Forster's critique of the distant, impersonal conventions of polite discourse, as voiced here by Clive and Anne, extends to the shallow foundations of the modern social fabric. Through his portrayal of Maurice as simultaneously 'embedded in' and 'outcast' from society, Forster questions the prevailing conception of 'Englishness' that proscribes homosexuality, ultimately stressing the need to redefine the limits of such rigid social categories.

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