

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
January 8, 2013

Hosts: Whitney Lloyd and George Weimer

Novel: *Howards End*, by E. M. Forster

Papers:

Biographical: Hamilton Emmons

Critical: Bob Brody

The Novel Club of Cleveland's January 8, 2013 meeting was called to order at 8:15 by president Leon Cabinet. Guests were introduced; a report from program committee was presented. The program committee will meet Sunday to finalize recommendations for the coming year—the committee is seriously considering all recommendations, and thanks members for their input. Ted Sande read the present list of nominations, but noted that the committee's eighteen-title list will be presented to membership after the committee's next meeting. Minutes of the December club meeting were read and accepted.

Presentation of this month's papers began at 8:35 with Ham Emmons' biographical account of E.M. Forster.

Forster (1879-1970) began writing at age 6; at age 9 he inherited a living fortune which enabled him to become a writer. He was grateful to be thus provided, noting "There's never any real risk as long as you have money...." That position is almost certainly represented in the views of the Schlegel sisters in *Howards End*.

After an unhappy school experience, Forster went to Kings College, Cambridge, where he had a good time. He earned a double degree, finishing in 1901, and later become part of the Bloomsbury Group. He traveled a lot with his mother, which led to a burst of creativity: he turned out four novels in quick succession in 1905-1910, a book of stories in 1911, and started in 1913 on *A Passage to India*, which was published in 1924. His last novel, a homosexual love story, was withheld from publication until his death, likely to avoid disrupting his life. Why did he stop writing after age 35? He said (weakly) he "couldn't relate" to contemporary society...but more likely he tired of the heterosexual love plot and felt he couldn't freely write about homosexual experience. Thus, "sex prevented" his writing more after he entered freely into enjoying his homosexual life rather than sublimating it into literature. In his private life he had a long relationship with a married man whose wife accepted Forster into the family. His homosexuality was a private issue, partly because he lived with his mother under her death when he was 66, and she was not comfortable with the issue. He protested against many social injustices, but homophobia was not among them.

Forster wrote chiefly about conflicts between cultures. One party to the conflict is generally the British upper class; the other might be foreign, or some other level of British society. Often a death brings things to a head. Sometimes one character improves in some respect as to values. Endings of loss and disappointment, redeemed only by hope for the future, are characteristic of his works. In them, humanity has four main characteristics: curiosity, free mind, belief in good taste, and belief in the human race. An element of mysticism is also common in Forster's novels. He became a Fellow of Kings College in 1945. He refused to allow his works to be made into films during his life, so it is ironic that he is probably best known now via film versions of his novels. He considered himself "not great" as a writer, because he created only three types of characters-- "those like I am, those who irritate me, and those I'd like to be"—whereas "great" authors get "more types" into their works. His own favorite among his works was *The Longest Journey*. He hoped his influence, if any, would be to help people enjoy life.

Bob Brody presented the critical paper.

Important entities among the characters in *Howards End* include three families—the Schlegels, the Wilcoxes, and the Basts--and then also the house (Howards End) and the narrator. An important concern throughout is who will inherit Howards End, allegorical representation of England with all its beauty and history. By leaving the house to Helen's child, **not** to any of the Wilcoxes, Margaret insures that the new bourgeoisie (Wilcoxes) will not inherit England.

The narrator is important in the gently ironic comments he makes on music, characters, etc. Does this narrator present Forster's own shifting assessment of the characters? At first his main sympathy seems to be with the Schlegels and Leonard Bast. But on second reading, it seems Forster has reservations about Schlegels and Basts. So, are Margaret and Helen hypocrites, or is Forster himself hypocritical? He admires Leonard's efforts, but ultimately seems to find Leonard incapable of improvement. Similarly, the Wilcoxes appear first as philistines and then later as responsible for moving England "out of protoplasm" so that "literary people" like the Schlegels can exist. The mantra from the novel, "only connect" is so famous—suggesting that if society could connect the artistic and the financial interests, all would be wonderful—but Margaret's tirade against Henry regarding "connection" seems inadequate to explain all of this.

Forster's use of language is an outstanding feature of his novels, in describing human relationships as well as the English countryside. Here it operates effectively on the individual level dealing with people's responsibility to connect cultures, as well as on the allegorical level expressing concern about England's future.

Discussion of the novel was launched with five questions supplied by Bob Brody.

1) Did your feelings about the Schlegel sisters change by the end of the novel? Were they hypocrites?

Readers found the sisters' development problematic but not hypocritical. Rather they seem to stand for changing roles and emerging voices of women at the time, responding to the developing context in which they find themselves. One reader felt they somewhat echo the roles of Marianne and Eleanor in *Sense and Sensibility*; another that they invoke the conflicting impulses of the "confused liberals of today;" yet another that Margaret begins as a "Shavian liberal" and then begins to see the logic of commercialist England. The sisters' various doings implicate many of the same issues operating in society now. These include the conflict of greed against social conscience and the need for liberal intellectuals and the commercial class to influence each other—so Margaret's marriage to Wilcox is driven by that urge to join the two classes. The novel suggests amalgamation of classes via the Margaret/Wilcox and the Helen/Bast pairings, even though these are both improbable matches.

2) Is it difficult to connect the cultural/spiritual side of one's life with the worldly/practical side? Is it easier or more difficult now than it was in Forster's time?

In this context, readers discussed whether the novel over all is allegorical in its presentation of cultures. The half-German Schlegels thus present a reference to the nineteenth-century Romantic Movement. Still, some found it improbable that all of these types of characters end up together at *Howards End*.

3) In his recent critique of American society, *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray concludes that the classes are moving farther apart with every decade. Would Leonard Bast have fared better in today's America or do the barriers of class, wealth and education still pose insurmountable obstacles for the Leonard Basts of the world?

Readers found it possible that current American social service safety nets might have rescued Leonard Bast, but were less certain about Jacky Bast. Regarding Jacky, we wondered where Jacky is, after all, at the end of the novel—and whether that issue suggests a regrettable flaw in the novel.

4) Does the narrator's commentary enhance or detract from the novel?

One reader declared the narrator's intrusive voice "a tremendous flaw in an otherwise fine novel." Another suggested that even if a flaw, the narrator's presence follows a longstanding tradition in English literature, going back through Hardy, Butler, and Fielding, to name a few. And a third voice called the narrator "essential," pointing out that to have made the film version without the narrator would have gutted the work and left it totally unsatisfactory.

5) Is Margaret's acceptance of Henry's marriage proposal plausible?

Reactions to the marriage of Margaret and Henry cropped up at various places in the discussion. Early on, Margaret was described as "patronizing" Henry,

and her acceptance of him called a disappointment in her character's development. But Henry is described as physically attractive, very wealthy, and also a "smooth operator," with his "hands on all the ropes"—all of which, along with the "only connect" imperative, can help explain Margaret's acceptance of him. Would Margaret and Henry ever "come to an understanding," really? One reader thought that might be so improbable as to be almost a fairy story, not credibly resolving questions of morality and forgiveness.

Closing remarks suggested that we seem to find this novel's individual characters believable but their interactions implausible—so that we are tempted to see the interactions as symbolic, and therefore not exactly "human" interactions. Under this interpretation the whole novel is driven by the idea of need for classes to amalgamate, which somehow seems unlikely to happen.

On the other hand, in writing a story, a novelist doesn't necessarily set out a list of goals to achieve—so maybe *Howards End* is actually not a polemic, but just mainly a good story which should not be over-interpreted in political terms.

Our time having run out, President Gabinet adjourned the meeting; readers returned to the dining room at 9:55 for some last bits of refreshment and conversation before heading home.