

# The Theme of Connection in E.M. Forster's Fiction

by Kate Gould



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### Scope of Topic

In considering two novels by E M Forster, this *Bookmark* points out the themes which can be found in other Forster novels. The two novels chosen have been filmed by Merchant-Ivory.

### BOOKS TO READ

E M Forster: *A Room With A View* (Penguin, 1955)

E M Forster: *Howards End* (Penguin, 1941)

### NOTES

Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.

This passage from *Howards End* (first published 1908) encapsulates Forster's visionary belief present in all his novels: that, to lead a full, satisfying life, we must give body and soul equal significance. The sentence above represents a plea from Forster to his fellow countrymen: he wishes them to mend that tragic English flaw, the undeveloped heart.

Old Mr Emerson's words in *A Room With A View* (first published 1910) -

You can transmute love, ignore it, muddle it, but you can never pull it out of you.

- are of extreme significance in the novel because the central theme of the work is the heroine's refusal to acknowledge her love for George: indeed, she will not even accept it herself. We can sympathise with Lucy, however, because George is of a lower social class than herself; she should not therefore be expected to fall in love with him. It is simply 'not done' for a young lady of Lucy's social standing to marry someone who works on the railways.

Although this situation is presented as a comic one, it has an underlying poignancy. Edwardian social convention means that Lucy finds it extremely difficult to come to terms with her passion for the impulsive George Emerson. Lucy refuses to "continue their intimacy . . . not because she disliked him, but because she did not know what had happened and suspected that he did know. And this frightened her." She is so used to suppressing her emotions (which is hardly surprising, considering the character of her spinster chaperone) that, when she experiences passionate feelings, she conceals them. She substitutes the prosaic in life for the passionate, instead of uniting them.

Lucy is, however, shown to have intelligence and insight - that is, the potential for 'connection' - on the third page of the novel:

She had an odd feeling that whenever these ill-bred tourists spoke the contest widened and deepened till it dealt, not with rooms and views, but with - well, with something quite different, whose existence she had not realised before.

This 'something quite different' (whose existence Lucy had not previously been aware of) is undoubtedly the omnipresent 'contest' between a passionate life and a prosaic life. The

perceptive Emersons bring Lucy's dormant passion to the surface; but the significance of Italy - which embodies passion - is also, of course, highly relevant.

A phrase from *Howards End* used to describe the archetypal businessman Henry Wilcox - "Amabat, amare timebat" - ('he loved, (but) he was afraid of loving') seems very relevant to the character of Lucy Honeychurch: she falls in love with George at the beginning of the novel - on arrival at the Pensione Bertolini - but, despite subsequent events, she finds it impossible to acknowledge her love for him. This is because she is a typically English character: she is therefore afraid of passion; her heart is undeveloped.

The novel relates the attempts of various undeniably 'English' people - excluding the Emersons, who are innately Italian - to come to terms with the intoxicating effect of the Italian landscape. Lucy's feelings whilst watching the carriage-driver and his lover - 'Phaethon' and 'Persephone' - on the way up to Fiesole inform us that, in reality, she possesses a heart that yearns for passionate love like theirs. Forster states that "Lucy had a spasm of envy . . . They were probably the only people enjoying that expedition". Mr Eager's cry to the driver, "'Piano! Piano!'", is also of significance because it illustrates the sobriety and predictability of the average Englishman: they are unable to cope with the slightest amount of excitement - and therefore passion - in their lives.

Old Mr Emerson, however, is a stark contrast to his companions because they - his compatriots - will not allow themselves to be anything other than fundamentally prosaic. By contrast, he is at one with the Italian landscape -

Leave them alone . . . Do we find happiness so often that we should turn it off the box when it happens to sit there? To be driven by lovers, a king might envy us, and if we part them it's more like sacrilege than anything I know.

- because he can make the all-important 'connection'. That is, this 'ill-bred' old man can reconcile the passion and the prose: he is wise enough to know that 'head' and 'heart' are of equal importance. He, unlike Miss Bartlett, Cecil Vyse and Miss Lavish, does not subordinate 'heart' to 'head'.

Miss Lavish realises that Mr Emerson is innately Italian, rather than British:

Miss Lavish frowned. It is hard when a person you have classed as typically British speaks out of his character.

Mr Emerson's belief that they should leave the carriage-driver alone because they have 'no rights over his soul' causes Eleanor Lavish to reach this conclusion. Mr Emerson connects 'spring in nature and spring in man': this ability to relate such vital things is significant because his companions, except for George, cannot do so. (Mr Eager only exclaims 'Non fate guerra al maggio' because he wishes merely to demonstrate his erudition). The Emerson ability to 'connect the prose and the passion' is constantly exposed.

Lucy is afraid (as I mentioned previously) of her deep feelings for George; therefore "As her time at Florence drew to its close she was only at ease amongst those to whom she felt indifferent". She denies the presence of her innermost feelings and therefore convinces herself that "She would not enjoy anything till she was safe at Rome". Rome, because George Emerson is not there, is 'safe', Lucy thinks; 'safe' is simply a synonym for 'pedestrian', however. Of course, being Italy, Rome would be anything other than prosaic; but, to the awakening Lucy, it is so, because the passionate George is not there. Forster skilfully arouses pathos for Lucy through his portrayal of her typically English fear of - and inability to come to terms with - her passion. It is English middle-class social conventions that, sadly, lead to Lucy's refusal to 'connect'.

Forster's comments on Italian character when the young carriage-driver is showing Lucy to the 'buoni uomini' - 'Italians are born knowing the way' - is meaningful: he obviously wants to proclaim yet again that passion, and the ability to 'connect', is inherent in Italians. The misunderstanding over Lucy's search for the clergymen - her poor Italian means that she calls them 'buoni uomini' - is amusing: the driver understands by these words that she is looking for George. ("Eccolo!" he exclaimed). This comes as no surprise because he would think it only natural that Lucy would be looking for the young man. The passionate Italian's ability to 'connect' results in Lucy's and George's subsequent key romantic encounter.

The Italian landscape - "this terrace was the well-head, the primal source where beauty gushed out to water the earth" - has an intoxicating effect on the inexperienced yet stirring Lucy. Forster believes that this beautiful landscape accounts for the intensity of the Italians' feelings. His comment on the prosaism of the English, however, - "not so these English. They gain knowledge slowly, and perhaps too late" - is highly relevant to Lucy. Fortunately, however, Lucy's acknowledgement of her deep-rooted passion for George does not come too late.

When the party of English people are returning from Fiesole, "for a moment they realized vast possibilities of good": for one moment 'in the dark and backward abysm of time' - for one finite moment in this infinite world - these cold English people become visionary. In other words, their cold, 'undeveloped hearts' briefly become warm, developed hearts: that is, they become emotional, passionate people. They make the 'connection'. John Colmer states that 'like the romantic poets, Forster believes that the imagination has the power to seize on symbolic moments of truth.' This observation has great relevance to the previous description of the English people.

Lucy deceives herself when she believes she is pouring out her soul to her cousin on the way back from Fiesole:

Only you can understand me. You warned me to be careful. And I - I thought I was developing.

Ironically, Lucy is in fact developing because she is learning to 'connect': not to submerge her passionate feelings under her prosaic ones. Lucy says "I am a little to blame . . . The sky . . . was gold, and the ground all blue, and for a moment he looked like someone in a book." In effect, Lucy blames Italy for her sudden passionate feelings.

After a taste of life, Lucy is dissatisfied with music:

Music seemed to her the employment of a child.

She now simply wants to live. This reminds us of Mr Beebe's prophecy that, if Lucy lives as she plays Beethoven, she will lead a very passionate life. Social convention, once again, forces Lucy to hold the opinion that "George would seem to have behaved like a cad." Lucy's belief that "such a wrong may react disastrously upon the soul" is both ironic and comical: George's passion for her acts upon her soul, but not disastrously. It actually releases her soul from its confinement.

Lucy does not want 'to be muddled' - a motif throughout the novel - by her 'extraordinary intercourse' with George: at this point, then, she is still too afraid of her passion to acknowledge it and therefore 'connect'. For the moment, because as yet she has not been able to come to terms with these sudden passionate emotions, she would rather put up with the unimaginative, emotionless Cecil Vyse. Mrs Honeychurch says that Cecil is 'well connected': this is ironic because, although he may be so financially, in terms of relationships he is certainly not so.

Cecil is so extremely prosaic that he is "like a Gothic statue" and "A Gothic statue implies celibacy". Indeed, he is so pretentious and unemotional that only when he speaks in English, as opposed to Italian, does he "look more human". He considers Lucy, his self-deceiving fiancé, as a mere work of art: as a "commonplace girl who happened to be musical". He continually compares her to a painting - "She was like a woman of Leonardo da Vinci's . . . She did develop most wonderfully day by day" - and this trait of his evidently displays his desire to mould Lucy into the fantastic, and somewhat ridiculous, 'Leonardo' image which he maintains.

Cecil's thoughts concerning the Honeychurches -

The Honeychurches were a worthy family, but he began to realize that Lucy was of another clay

- exhibit his over-riding superciliousness: that is, he not only believes that Lucy is 'of another clay', but also that he himself is. The phrase 'his stiffness remained' is a wonderful example of Cecil's utterly dull, prosaic nature: indeed, it is rather ironic that Cecil persists in using the Italian language when he is so devoid of passion.

Mr Beebe's perceptive remarks about Lucy - "Does it seem reasonable that she should play so wonderfully, and live so quietly? I suspect that one day . . . music and life will mingle" - fall on deaf ears: Cecil Vyse is such an insensitive, boring prig that he cannot 'connect' in the slightest. He cannot possibly relate Lucy's present prosaic life - despite her great capacity for passion - with himself. He does not even seem to realise that he seriously lacks passion and therefore cannot possibly 'connect'.

Lucy's feelings about her present life, inextricably linked with Cecil, are, of course, reflected in her choice of music:

She played Schumann. 'Now some Beethoven,' called Cecil . . . She shook her head and played Schumann again . . . The sadness of the incomplete.

She obviously refuses to play Beethoven because Beethoven is fundamentally passionate - she does not, in the presence of Cecil as opposed to George, feel at all passionate - whereas Schumann is not so passionate at all. Forster goes on to state that in Italy Lucy played differently: she played very dramatic Beethoven. This is due to both the passion of Italy itself and the passion which she sees in George.

Mr Beebe's comment to Cecil that Lucy "has learned . . . what it is to love" is ironic because he does not really believe that she has done so: not through Cecil, anyway. Cecil says that he thinks that country-dwellers 'must be the best' but that "It's true that in nine cases out of ten they don't seem to notice anything". The second remark again shows his pretentiousness because he fails to 'notice anything' concerning his relationship with Lucy. He is so 'wrapped up in his books' that he ignores life and therefore passion. Cecil is so emotionless that, even though engaged to Lucy, he has to ask for permission to kiss her. The kiss itself is scarcely passionate:

As he approached her, he found time to wish that he could recoil. As he touched her, his gold pince-nez became dislodged and was flattened between them.

This passage depicts perfectly how Cecil simply loves Lucy as an artistic image: from afar and merely to gaze at. The slightest physical union repels him because he is so prosaic and cold. Indeed, the 'gold pince-nez' could easily be a metaphor for Cecil because it represents all his worthless, ludicrous values.

Lucy feels that in Italy "social barriers were . . . not particularly high". Cecil, however, is so narrow-minded that he does not realise that her heart is in Italy: that, at heart, she is as

passionate as George or an Italian. He does not comprehend that she desires 'equality beside the man she loved' - George - and that Italy has opened up her soul for her so that she realises that she is passionately in love with George. Italy opened up the doorway for 'connection' for Lucy: its possibilities could be compared to those suggested by 'the overarching sky' in *A Passage to India*.

George is simply antithetical to Cecil in all respects: he loves the outdoors, loves Lucy for what she is and has neither physical nor mental inhibitions: "he followed Freddy into the divine". George can unite his passionate self with his love of literature and can therefore 'connect'. By the time she has seen George with Freddy by the 'sacred lake', she realises that she is in a muddle: that Cecil is the most tedious, self-centred and unimaginative person one could think of.

Mr Emerson - who wisely thinks 'Passion is sanity' - persuades Lucy to acknowledge her love for George: he is wary of 'muddle' and realises that this is Lucy's predicament. He tells her: "love is of the body". He yearns for "a little directness to liberate the soul". The 'darkness' obscuring her soul is removed, and her simple message for George - "Give George my love . . . Tell him, "Muddle"" - contains a profound poignancy. Lucy has finally, with a little help from Mr Emerson, sorted out the 'muddle' and acknowledged her passion. She has made the 'connection' before it is too late!

The theme of 'Only Connect' dominates *Howard's End*. The following passage from the novel -

In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect - connect without bitterness until all men are brothers

- outlines its major theme: that - to be in harmony with both our surroundings and our fellow men - we need to 'connect', but also that a rural setting, such as that of Howard's End itself, will facilitate this connection.

The question Forster puts in *Howard's End* is: who shall inherit England? "Into which country will it lead, England or suburbia?" For Forster, his England is the embodiment of 'passion', whereas suburbia - that entirely distinct kingdom encroaching upon the Herefordshire countryside - represents 'prose'. A quotation from *Maurice* (1914), "concerned as they are *with a passion that few English minds have admitted*, they establish perfection in their lives, at all events for a time", seems relevant here. This is because Forster believes that - to lead a full life - we must equate the passion with the prose: we need to make this vital 'connection'.

Margaret Schlegel and Ruth Wilcox - like the Emersons - can 'connect'. However, a significant antithesis - the contrast between the mechanistic lifestyle of the Wilcoxes and the traditional, pre-industrial way of life of the Schlegels - underlies *Howard's End*. The Wilcoxes' world is one of material possessions - "newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs" - whereas the Schlegels' is one of spirituality. This spirituality is encapsulated in their love of culture, particularly Beethoven's music. These two families - linked, significantly, by Margaret and Mrs Wilcox because these two figures have the insight to 'connect' - could therefore be perfect citizens of Forster's England.

It is Margaret whom Forster uses verbally to convey his main theme. Perhaps the most explicit expression of the theme of 'connection' occurs at the beginning of Chapter XXII:

Margaret greeted her lord with peculiar tenderness on the morrow. Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we

are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man.

Margaret's idealism, yet wisdom, is evident here: she desperately wants Henry Wilcox to build the 'rainbow bridge'. She passionately wants him to be a whole, balanced, 'clear-sighted' person instead of a 'half monk' or a 'half beast'. The 'unconnected arches' are symbolic of the ideal reconciliation of opposites, which she thinks he should strive for. She desperately wants him to connect the passion and the prose.

Henry Wilcox's world is a commercial one of 'telegrams and anger': he is so involved in this superficial existence that, when he leaves the business world, his life dissolves into 'panic and emptiness'. Helen Schlegel actually describes the Wilcoxes' inner life as one of 'panic and emptiness'. Henry Wilcox fails to 'connect' because he cannot find a place for passion in his utterly prosaic existence.

Conflict occurs between Margaret and Henry when he refuses to allow Helen - heavily pregnant by Leonard Bast - to stay the night at Howard's End. The ironic point is that Henry was himself guilty of seducing Jacky Bast (Leonard's wife) when she was a girl. Margaret becomes enraged:

You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! You have had a mistress - I forgave you. My sister has a lover - you drive her from the house. Do you see the connection? These men are you. You can't recognize them, because you cannot connect.

Here, then, the main theme of 'connection' assumes both personal and social implications. Henry Wilcox is typical of the vast majority of the English, Forster believes; they will not allow themselves to be anything other than fundamentally prosaic. They cannot 'connect' because they have 'undeveloped hearts'.

Henry Wilcox could be compared to Cecil Vyse in *A Room With A View* because they both fail to recognise passion, let alone be influenced by it. They are both so engrossed in their own, private worlds - Cecil in his art and literature ("Cecil, whom the cry had not awoken") and Henry in his commerce ("a life in which telegrams and anger count") - that they are oblivious to anything else: that is, to Lucy Honeychurch and Margaret Wilcox - as well as to Forster - they are oblivious to life.

Throughout Forster's major novels, the underlying bias is that the English - as a race - possess an innate lack of spiritual vision. This inherent flaw is their inability to acknowledge passion: that is, they cannot achieve a tri-partite nature because they fail to perceive the significance of passion in human relationships. Their 'undeveloped hearts' mean that they substitute Art for Life: for example, Cecil Vyse lives his life through literally and Lucy Honeychurch - prior to opening up her heart to George - lives through the passion which Beethoven evokes. Henry Wilcox's world is one of 'telegrams and anger' - that is, he lives through his business; by contrast, Margaret 'can only see the music'. Poignantly, they are unable to 'connect to the prose and the passion': they cannot achieve the building of the 'rainbow bridge'.

## FURTHER READING

E M Forster, *Where Angels Fear To Tread* (Penguin, 1989)

E M Forster, *A Passage to India* (Penguin, 1989)

E M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Penguin, 1990)

E M Forster, *Maurice* (Penguin, 1988)

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