

# **From Personal Issues to National Concerns: A Study in E.M Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread & Howards End***

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## **Abstract**

E.M. Forster (1879-1970) is one of the important novelists who dealt with the personal and social lives of the people in England during the early beginning of the twentieth century. During his literary career, he developed gradually his views about man and his position in society.

In his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1902), the focus is laid on local and personal issues in the lives of the characters. It is limited to the relations between neighbours in small communities. Though the setting is shifted to Italy, Forster does not make full use of this shift to present cultural or racial conflicts; rather he limits his plot to the private troubles of some characters that have no wider interest in life. His characters are isolated from the larger currents of the social and political life, preoccupied with some personal problems that take all their time and energies. But *Howards End* (1910) shows a clear and important shift from the limited affairs of daily life to the more general and crucial affairs that concern the whole society. He deals with the political and economic issues which were very important in England at that time.

## **II**

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* presents two settings that represent two different civilizations connected together by a secondary character, Lilia, a foolish and headstrong widow of the eldest son of Mrs. Herriton who keeps her at Sawston so as to ensure that Lilia's little daughter, Irma, shall be brought up a good Herriton, loyal to the family's old laws and reputation. To keep Lilia from making any undesirable marriage, Mrs. Herriton sends her to Italy chaperoned by Miss Caroline Abbott, a girl ten years younger than Lilia but known in Sawston's society for her respectability. But soon after her arrival in Italy, Lilia falls in love with

Gino, the son of an Italian dentist, marries her and settles down with her in Monteriano. Lilia's marriage to Gino sparks the main action of the novel. The young widow hopes to find in Italy and marriage a freedom that she has been denied to in Sawston, but she is disappointed. Gino proves bad as a husband; incapable of offering his wife the kind of freedom she wishes. Left to herself in the little provincial Italian town, Lilia feels more miserable than she has ever been in Sawston. Gino asserts an Italian husband's authority on her, accompanied with blind and terrible anger. Lilia dies on child-birth, and the English family at Sawston plans rescue of the infant from his father's hand. Three persons are summoned to the job: Philip, the younger, clever, surviving Herriton son, his sister, Harriet, and Caroline Abbott. Direct bribery and persuasion having failed, an attempt is made to kidnap the baby who is killed during the attempt accidentally in a horrible incident. It is Harriet who has kidnapped the baby without her brother's knowledge. It is only in the incident that Philip discovers the child dead. The father, Gino, after an outburst of insane anger, is comforted and becomes calm and friendly. The novel ends with the return of the English party to England in a new spirit and consideration of matters.

Into such a simple narrative, Forster employs pieces of sharp description of places, characters and situations which give to the whole affair a convincing air of reality. All the principal characters in the novel undergo some changes in personality as a result of the sad experiences they pass through. Yet Caroline and Philip are the two protagonists on whom the attention is focused.

Caroline encourages Lilia's marriage because she hates "the idleness, the stupidity" of Sawston and hopes that Lilia will escape Sawston apathy, but she soon realizes that Lilia only "changed one groove for another- a worse groove."<sup>i</sup> Hence she feels that she is the cause of Lilia's unhappiness and death. There is only one way for her of atonement: The child must be brought to England and properly reared.

When she comes back to "save" the baby, Caroline's approach to life is still simplistic: "To her imagination Monteriano had become a magic city of vice" (p. 87) and she "prepared to do battle with the powers of evil." (p. 127) She returns to Italy to be Mrs. Herriton's agent and fulfill her wish to see the infant brought to her. But Caroline learns a lot from

Lilia's experience. After meeting Gino and noticing his loving treatment of his son, she comes to realize that they have no right to take the baby from his father's hand. She puts this matter clearly and frankly to Philip:

Do you want the child to stay with his father who loves him and will bring him up badly, or do you want him to come to Sawston where no one loves him but where he will be brought up well? Settle it... settle which side you'll fight on.  
(p. 167)

She regards the infant as a human being, not a mere thing; a being who needs the love of a father. As she and Gino talk, "the horrible truth" that wicked people are capable of love stood naked before her, and her "moral being was abashed." (p. 120)

At the beginning, Philip's attitudes to life are affected by his mother who has a complete dominance on him. He is his mother's boy, who grows up to see the life through her eyes. He has no serious aim in life; and being a boy of his rich mother, he does not like work or believe in its value. His mother has kept him "a puppet who can criticize but not rebel." (p. 87) He even enjoys his mother's "diplomacy" with the result that he "does not think of his own morals and behavior anymore." (p. 82) He reflects his mother's condescending attitude towards Lilia. He visits Italy twice, and in both visits, he is obedient to his mother's wishes. Until the dramatic death of the child and its consequences, neither human love nor love for truth is within his experience. The child's death and subsequent happenings, especially meeting Caroline, prove that he is capable of change as a result of life's experiences.

Philip comes gradually to recognize and reject his mother's dominance and all her value. "To what purpose was her diplomacy, her insincerity, her continued repression of vigor?" (p.98) It is Caroline who denounces Mrs. Herriton and tries to open Philip's eyes to the truth of his mother: "your mother has behaved dishonorably throughout... She has lied or acted lies everywhere... I cannot trust your mother." (p. 121) Here, Caroline has the ambition to help Philip be independent, be a man. Philip recognizes Caroline's role in his maturation:

In the train, while on his way back to England with Caroline after their tragic visit to Italy, Philip reviews sadly yet consciously and deeply his previous experiences and his new love for Caroline. He can see that "He

had reached love by spiritual path. Caroline's thoughts and her goodness and her nobility had moved him first, and now her whole body and all its gestures had been transfigured by them." (p. 196) At the end of his self-examination, he comes finally to reject Sawston for "London and work". Thus, he arrives at self-recognition after facing the facts of his life courageously. Caroline's rejection of him is the final blow to his self complacency, which leads to the completion of the process of his character re-molding.

Toward the end of the novel, Philip thinks that Caroline is on the point of declaring her love to him, but he is shocked to discover that it is not him that she loves but Gino. She reveals this secret to him in a bitter ironic way, telling him her reasons for rejecting him: "I dare tell you this because I like you and because you are without passion. You look on life as a spectacle, you don't enter it, you only find it funny or beautiful." (p. 201) With this rejection and severe criticism, Philip is transformed from a spectator to a participant in the events. He is recalled from his spiritual death to active life. He learns that life is more complex and heroic than he has thought earlier; it is not just a beautiful spectacle to view. Because of this, John Colmer, a critic, suggests a possible subtitle to *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, which is "the Education of Philip".<sup>ii</sup>

Thus, Philip accepts the moral responsibility for the child's death, hence he is convinced that he alone should tell Gino of his son's death venturing his life with Gino's blind anger.

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* is very characteristic of Forster's early art. He is concerned with the personal troubles of his characters who have no larger social concerns that may shift their problems to a broader dimension of significance.

With *Howards End*, Forster broadens his concern from the private to the public world, confronting for the first time not just personal or domestic antagonists, but England's social, political and economic powers. This novel asks: how are we to be saved in this industrial-commercial age? It was written but a few years before the First World War, and Forster had the international situation in mind.

*Howards End* presents the society of the cultivated and well-to-do; it deals mainly with the world of business in that society. It is predominantly upper middle class world, with rich town houses and country houses for families having a plenty of servants, a world where class distinction is taken for granted. In this world of the novel, the British Empire is in its heyday. Business and commerce thrive; and the poor are kept in their place as far as possible.<sup>iii</sup> The novel tries to say something about what shall become of England, the England of the years before 1914. It is both an analysis of the English social structure at its time and a prophecy about the fate of that structure. It tries to show who shall inherit England. The symbol of England is the house whose name gives the novel its title. Forster also explores the conflict between an individual's beliefs and the rules of society. The relations between classes, interrelationships between money and culture, and the examination of possible steps towards the achievement of sexual equality are all taken seriously in the novel.

Just as the country is opposed to the city, so are the major characters to one another. Margret and Helen Schlegel, half German, half English, value the inner life, while the Wilcox family with the notable exception of Ruth Wilcox, the outer. Independently rich, Margret and Helen live with their adolescent brother, Tibby, in Wickham Palace, a comfortable London house on a quiet street. The two young women devote most of their energy to conversation and culture. Henry Wilcox, a successful London business, lives with his wife Ruth and their three grown up children at Howards End, Ruth's ancestral house.

Superficially, Margret and Helen are similar, both being liberal and intelligent. Yet, the differences that help to define the novel's structure distinguish one from the other. Helen, the younger and prettier of the two, is the more impulsive. Visiting Howards End for the first time she becomes infatuated not only with Paul, the younger Wilcox son, but also

with the entire Wilcox family. One kiss from Paul is enough to bring about their engagement. But the engagement is off the next day when Helen discovers that Paul lacks the courage to announce their engagement. Disillusioned, she now sees Paul and all the Wilcoxes “as fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs” behind which lie “panic and emptiness”.<sup>iv</sup> Helen is also a romantic idealist. Truth and justice, she believes, are absolute. After the episode with Paul, she takes up the cause of Leonard Bast, the young clerk, who loses his job through the misadvice of Henry extremism. She tries to trap Henry into giving him a job. But the project fails when Jacky (Leonard’s wife) recognizes Henry to be her former lover. That night, at the local inn, Helen and Leonard copulate, and she becomes pregnant. In taking up Leonard’s case, Helen tries to behave heroically, and she is nearly shipwrecked. Following her one night affair with Leonard, she appears with “the look of a sailor who has lost everything at sea”.<sup>v</sup>

Margret is impulsive too, but less than Helen and much more balanced in outlook. Unlike Helen who is mainly absorbed by her inner world of thoughts and feelings, Margret sees that the outer life in society deserves watching and participating.

Henry Wilcox stands for the flaws of the industrial society. Being a caricature of a businessman, he is stiff and imperceptive about himself and others. Forster’s dislike of him comes through again and again. We learn of Henry’s “patronizing tone” and his feeling that “what he did not know could not be worth knowing”. (p. 151)

Only Ruth Wilcox stands out from the rest of the family. She is a wise old woman, who incarnates the spirit of Howards End. Forster wants her to be a symbolic figure: She values the past and the unseen, is intuitive rather than intellectual. She maintains a posthumous existence in the novel. She also represents the primary connection between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. Her friendship with Margret reaches its peak when she invites Margret to Howards End after hearing that the Schlegels are about to lose their own house. (p. 83) Her son Charles calls her “the mater” (p. 17) as if she had no existence outside that role, and indeed her “life had been spent in the service of husband and sons.” (p. 74) Mrs. Wilcox fulfils her novelistic role and dies after having discerned

in Margret her spiritual heir and bequeathed Howards End, and by implication her husband, to her.

For all their differences, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes are rich. Leonard Bast, the novel's other key character, is poor. A young clerk, who lives in a squalid London flat with his mistress- later his wife- Jacky, he tries to relieve the tedium of his existence by going to concerts and reading literature. Victimized by the outer life and by the evils of industrial society, he cannot find a decent position and respectable living for himself. He feels alienated to society; and because of the acute class distinction, he becomes a fragmented being who will never be a whole.

The plot of *Howards End* is contrived to effect a partial synthesis of its antithetical elements.<sup>vi</sup> Margret is to marry Henry. Helen is to have a child by Leonard, and then, in the final settlement at Howards End, Margret becomes the acknowledged mistress of the house. No novel of Forster is more obviously contrived. Wilcoxes, Schlegels, and Bast's are three groups of characters socially and psychologically so far apart that in the normal course of events there is no reason why they should become involved with one another.<sup>vii</sup>

In the final chapter, the antitheses achieve a resolution: Margret and Henry, with Helen and her baby, are peacefully settled at Howards End, of which Margret is a mistress. It is a qualified and precarious resolution.<sup>viii</sup> For the lives of the two sisters are still incomplete. Helen has a child but no husband; Margret a husband but no child. But Helen's child suggests hope, the child of a lower class father who will be brought up by Margret. He is the symbol of the "only connect" which was Margret's motto to the good life.

The novel reflects Forster's occupation with the future of England. He wants to say that Howards End, as England, must pass to those who will cherish it and their destinies become indistinguishable from it. Towards the end of the novel, Forster puts the symbol aside and refers to England by name directly. In a memorable scene, Margret Schlegel is watching the tide in Poole Harbour, she ponders on England's inheritance:

England was alive, throbbing through all her estuaries, crying for joy through the mouths of all her gulls, and the north wind, with contrary motion, blew stronger against her rising seas. What did it mean? For what end are her fair

complexities; her changes of soil, her sinuous coast? Does she belong to those who have moulded her and made her feared by other lands, or to those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world's fleet accompanying her towards eternity. (p. 185)

Howards End-the house- itself is practically a character in the novel as well as a main symbol. To the Wilcoxes, it is merely a house, and they do not know that to Mrs. Wilcox it had been "a spirit for which she sought a spiritual heir." (p. 98) The inheritance of the house by Margret, the well-cultured woman, with the little boy of Leonard Bast, the poor worker who is pushed to live on the fringe of society, under her custody symbolizes Forster's suggested solution of England's dilemma: a strong coalition between the cultured and the working class.

#### IV

Forster's immaturity as a writer can be seen in his early novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, where his concern is very limited; it is restricted to the personal concerns of a few characters who try to get their personal ambitions and emotional satisfaction. Lilia Herriton is attracted and aroused by the youth and energy of Gino, who, by English moral and social standards, lacks culture and civilization. In this novel, Forster is more melodramatic than in the later novel because he mixes the comic and the tragic, the trivial and the serious. His view of life is narrow and limited since he does not present his character in their broad social contexts. They are isolated from the wide current of life and preoccupied only by their simple everyday affairs.

Whereas in *Howards End*, Forster reaches a higher stage of development in his achievement as a novelist. The novel dramatizes the fact that in the modern world there is a separation between culture and wealth. The novel portrays Forster's view of contemporary England in considerable details. England is made a character, and its wealth and future are central subjects. Forster takes the house, Howard End, as a symbol of England itself, and the novel tries to settle the question of who should rule the country: the educated or the vulgar, the workers or the capitalists. At the end, Margret, the gentle and well-educated girl, inherits the house and takes Bast's child, the son of a poor worker, under her tutelage, something which suggests that an alliance between the cultured and the working class is vital for the rise of the country.



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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> E.M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (London: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 68. Subsequent references to the novel is to this edition, therefore only page number is parenthetically cited in the text.
- <sup>ii</sup> John Colmer, *E.M. Forster: The Personal Voice* (London: Routledge and Keagen Paul, 1975), p. 62.
- <sup>iii</sup> H. J. Oliver, *The Art of E.M. Forster* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 38.
- <sup>iv</sup> Finkelstein Blumenthal, *Forster's Women: Eternal Differences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 220.
- <sup>v</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 286. Subsequent quotations are from this *edition, therefore, only page numbers are used to refer to them.*
- <sup>vi</sup> Philip Gardner, ed., *E.M. Forster: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1973), p. 125.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> John Sayre Martin, *E.M. Forster: The Endless Journey* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 169.

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**من القضايا الشخصية الى الهموم الوطنية:  
دراسة في روايتي ي. م. فورستر مكان تخشاه الملائكة وهاوردز إند**

بقلم: الأستاذ سعد قاسم صغير  
المدرس المساعد علي محمد صكر

### خلاصة البحث

ي. م. فورستر، روائي انكليزي معروف، شهدت حياته الأدبية تطورا ملحوظا. في روايته الأولى، المكان الذي تخشاه الملائكة، يقدم فورستر مجموعة من الشخصيات التي لا هم لها سوى تطمين حاجاتها الشخصية والعاطفية بعيدا عن أية هموم إجتماعية تتعلق بالمجتمع ككل. حيث تدور القصة عن فتاة تذهب الى إيطاليا فتنزج هناك شخصا سيئا يسومها مر العذاب فتموت عند الولادة. تحاول عائلتها خطف الطفل بعد أن رفض والده تسليمه، ويموت الطفل أثناء عملية الخطف نتيجة لحادثة تصادم مع قطار. وبفعل الصدمة، وبعد أن يروا ردة فعل الأب العنيفة تجاه مقتل ابنه، تفتح بعض الشخصيات أعينها على حقيقة أنه حتى الأب السيء يمكن أن يحب ابنه بصدق. وهكذا فإن موضوع الرواية محدود وبسيط ويميل الى الميلودراما، حيث الجد والهزل يسيران مع بعض.

أما في رواية هاوردز إند، التي كتبت بعد سنوات طويلة من الرواية الأولى، فإن إهتمام الروائي قد توسع ليشمل موضوعات حساسة ذات صلة بمستقبل بريطانيا ومن يجب أن يحكمها. فالشخصيات هنا تمثل رموزا أبعد من ذواتها الشخصية. حيث عائلة ولكوك الأرسقراطية التي تسكن قصر هاوردز إند وتشتغل بالتجارة والمال. وعائلة شليغل، هيلين ومارغريت، اللتان تقيمان في نفس القصر. ويمثلان الطبقة الأرسقراطية الغنية. وهناك العامل الفقير، ليونارد باست الذي يعيش حياة البؤس والفاقة بعد أن وجد نفسه عاطلا عن العمل. ويمثل الطبقة العاملة الفقيرة التي تعاني من الشعور بالغربة في المجتمع. وفي نهاية الرواية، تراث مارغريت القصر، ويرمز الى إنكلترا كبلد. ومارغريت فتاة متعلمة عالية الثقافة تمثل الطبقة المتعلمة، وتأخذ ابن العامل باست لتربيته تحت رعايتها، وكأن الكاتب يريد القول أن إنكلترا لا يبنيتها إلا تحالف الطبقة المثقفة والطبقة العاملة.