

# E. M. Forster

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**Edward Morgan Forster**



E. M. Forster aged 36 in 1915

**Born:** 1 January 1879  
Marylebone, London, England

**Died:** 7 June 1970 (aged 91)  
Coventry, Warwickshire, England

**Occupation:** Novelist

**Writing period:** 1907 - 1930

**Genres:** Realism  
Modernism

**Subjects:** Class Division

**Influences:** Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence

**Influenced:** Siegfried Sassoon

**Edward Morgan Forster**, OM (January 1, 1879 – June 7, 1970), was an English novelist, short story writer, and essayist. He is known best for his ironic and well-plotted novels examining class difference and hypocrisy in early 20th-century British society. Forster's humanistic impulse toward understanding and sympathy may be aptly summed up in the epigraph to his 1910 novel *Howards End*: "Only connect."

Forster was homosexual, but this fact was not made public during his lifetime.<sup>[1]</sup> His posthumously released novel *Maurice*, never intended for publication, tells of the coming of age of an explicitly gay male character.

## Contents

- 1 Early years

- 2 After A Passage to India
- 3 Novels
- 4 Key themes
- 5 Notes
- 6 Notable works by Forster
  - 6.1 Novels
  - 6.2 Short stories
  - 6.3 Plays and Pageants
  - 6.4 Film Scripts
  - 6.5 Libretto
  - 6.6 Collections of essays and broadcasts
  - 6.7 Literary criticism
  - 6.8 Biography
  - 6.9 Travel writing
  - 6.10 Miscellaneous writings
- 7 Notable films based upon novels by Forster
- 8 Secondary Works on Forster
- 9 External links

## Early years

Born in London, the son of an architect, Forster was to have been named Henry but was baptised Edward by accident. Among his ancestors were members of the Clapham Sect. As a boy he inherited £8,000 from his paternal aunt Marianne

Thornton, daughter of the abolitionist Henry Thornton, which was enough to live on and enabled him to become a writer. He attended Tonbridge School in Kent as a day boy.

At King's College, Cambridge between 1897 and 1901, he became a member of the Apostles (formally named the Cambridge Conversazione Society), a discussion society. Many of its members went on to constitute what came to be known as the Bloomsbury Group, of which Forster was a peripheral member in the 1910s and 1920s. There is a famous recreation of Forster's Cambridge at the beginning of *The Longest Journey*.

After leaving university he traveled on the continent with his mother. He visited Egypt, Germany and India with the classicist Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson in 1914. While engaged in war work for the Red Cross in Egypt in the winter of 1916-17, he met in Alexandria a seventeen-year-old tram conductor, Mohammed el-Adl, with whom he fell in love. Mohammed was to become one of the principal inspirations for Forster's literary work. When the youth died of tuberculosis in Alexandria in the spring of 1922, Forster was driven to keep his memory alive and attempted to

do so in the form of a book-length letter, preserved at King's College, Cambridge. The letter begins with a quotation from A.E. Housman: "*Good-night, my lad, for nought's eternal; No league of ours, for sure*"; it concludes with an acknowledgement that the task of resurrecting their love is impossible.

Forster spent a second spell in India in the early 1920s as the private secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas. *The Hill of Devi* is his non-fictional account of this trip. After returning from India, he completed his last novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), which became his most famous and widely translated work.

## ***After A Passage to India***

Forster stopped writing novels at the age of 45, and produced little more fiction apart from short stories intended only for himself and a small circle of friends.

In the 1930s and 1940s Forster became a successful broadcaster on BBC Radio and a public figure associated with the British Humanist Association. He was awarded a Benson Medal in

1937.

Forster had a happy personal relationship, beginning in the early 1930s, with Bob Buckingham, a constable in the London Metropolitan Police. He developed a friendship with Buckingham's wife May and included the couple in his circle, which also included the writer and editor of *The Listener* J.R. Ackerley, the psychologist W.J.H. Sprott, and, for a time, the composer Benjamin Britten. Other writers with whom Forster associated included the poet Siegfried Sassoon and the Belfast-based novelist Forrest Reid.

After the death of his mother, Forster accepted an honorary fellowship at King's College, Cambridge and lived for the most part in the college, doing relatively little. In 1969 he was made a member of the Order of Merit. Forster died in Coventry the following year at the age of 91, at the home of the Buckinghams.

## Novels

Forster had five novels published in his lifetime. Although *Maurice* appeared shortly after his death,

it had been written nearly sixty years earlier. A seventh novel, *Arctic Summer*, was never finished.

His first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), is the story of Lilia, a young English widow who falls in love with an Italian, and of the efforts of her bourgeois relatives to get her back from Monteriano (based on San Gimignano). The mission of Philip Herriton to retrieve her from Italy has features in common with that of Lambert Strether in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, a work Forster discussed ironically and somewhat disapprovingly in his book *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). *Where Angels Fear to Tread* was adapted into a film by Charles Sturridge in 1991.

Next, Forster published *The Longest Journey* (1907), an inverted bildungsroman following the lame Rickie Elliott from Cambridge to a career as a struggling writer and then to a post as a schoolmaster, married to the unappetising Agnes Pembroke. In a series of scenes on the hills of Wiltshire which introduce Rickie's wild half-brother Stephen Wonham, Forster attempts a kind of sublime related to those of Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence.

Forster's third novel, *A Room with a View* (1908) is

his lightest and most optimistic. It was started before any of his others, as early as 1901, and exists in earlier forms referred to as "Lucy." The book is the story of young Lucy Honeychurch's trip to Italy with her cousin, and the choice she must make between the free-thinking George Emerson and the repressed aesthete Cecil Vyse. George's father Mr. Emerson quotes thinkers who influenced Forster, including Samuel Butler. *A Room with a View* was filmed by Merchant-Ivory in 1987.

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* can be seen collectively as Forster's Italian novels. Both include references to the famous Baedeker guidebooks and concern narrow-minded middle-class English tourists abroad. The books share many themes with short stories collected in *The Celestial Omnibus* and *The Eternal Moment*.

*Howards End* (1910) is an ambitious "condition-of-England" novel concerned with different groups within the Edwardian middle classes represented by the Schlegels (bohemian intellectuals), the Wilcoxes (thoughtless plutocrats) and the Bastis (struggling lower-middle-class aspirants).

It is frequently observed that characters in Forster's



novels die suddenly. This is true of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Howards End* and, most particularly, *The Longest Journey*.

Forster achieved his greatest success with *A Passage to India* (1924). The novel takes as its subject the relationship between East and West, seen through the lens of India in the later days of the British Raj. Forster connects personal relationships with the politics of colonialism through the story of the Englishwoman Adela Quested, the Indian Dr. Aziz, and the question of what did or did not happen between them in the Marabar Caves.

*Maurice* (1971) was published after the novelist's death. It is a homosexual love story which also returns to matters familiar from Forster's first three novels, such as the suburbs of London in the English home counties, the experience of attending Cambridge, and the wild landscape of Wiltshire. The novel was controversial, given that Forster's sexuality had not been previously known or widely acknowledged. Today's critics continue to argue over the authorship of *Maurice* and the extent to which Forster's sexuality, even his alleged personal activities<sup>[2]</sup>, influenced his writing.

## Key themes

Forster's views as a secular humanist are at the heart of his work, which often depicts the pursuit of personal connections in spite of the restrictions of contemporary society. His humanist attitude is expressed in the non-fictional essay *What I Believe*.

Forster's two best-known works, *A Passage to India* and *Howards End*, explore the irreconcilability of class differences. Although considered by some to have less serious literary weight, *A Room with a View* also shows how questions of propriety and class can make connection difficult. The novel is his most widely read and accessible work, remaining popular long after its original publication. His posthumous novel *Maurice* explores the possibility of class reconciliation as one facet of a homosexual relationship.

Sexuality is another key theme in Forster's works, and it has been argued that a general shift from heterosexual love to homosexual love can be detected over the course of his writing career. The

foreword to *Maurice* describes his struggle with his own homosexuality, while similar issues are explored in several volumes of homosexually charged short stories. Forster's explicitly homosexual writings, the novel *Maurice* and the short-story collection *The Life to Come*, were published shortly after his death.

Forster is noted for his use of symbolism as a technique in his novels, and he has been criticised (as by his friend Roger Fry) for his attachment to mysticism. One example of his symbolism is the Wych Elm tree in *Howards End*; the characters of Mrs Wilcox in that novel and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* have a mystical link with the past and a striking ability to connect with people from beyond their own circles.

## Notes

1. ^ [http://www.glbtc.com/literature/forster\\_em.html](http://www.glbtc.com/literature/forster_em.html)
2. ^ BBC News Website.

## Notable works by Forster

### Novels

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* 1905; *The Longest Journey* 1907; *A Room with a View* 1908; *Howards End* 1910; *A Passage to India* 1924; *Maurice* (supposedly written in 1913-1914, published posthumously in 1971, attributed to Forster); *Arctic Summer* 1980 (posthumous, unfinished)

## **Short stories**

*The Celestial Omnibus (and other stories)* 1911 · *The Eternal Moment and other stories* 1928 · *Collected Short Stories (1947)* (- a combination of the above two titles, containing: "The Story of A Panic" · "The Other Side Of The Hedge" · "The Celestial Omnibus" · "Other Kingdom" · "The Curate's Friend" · "The Road From Colonus" · "The Machine Stops" · "The Point Of It" · "Mr Andrews" · "Co-ordination" · "The Story Of The Siren" · "The Eternal Moment" · *The Life to Come and other stories* 1972 (posthumous) (containing the following stories written between approximately 1903 and 1960: "Ansell" · "Albergo Empedocle" · "The Purple Envelope" · "The Helping Hand" · "The Rock" · "The Life to Come" · "Dr Woolacott" · "Arthur Snatchfold" · "The Obelisk" · "What Does It Matter? A Morality" ·

"The Classical Annex" · "The Torque" · "The Other Boat" · "Three Courses and a Dessert: Being a New and Gastronomic Version of the Old Game of Consequences") · "My Wood"

## **Plays and Pageants**

*Abinger Pageant* 1934 · *England's Pleasant Land* 1940

## **Film Scripts**

*A Diary for Timothy* 1945 (directed by Humphrey Jennings, spoken by Michael Redgrave)

## **Libretto**

*Billy Budd* 1951 (based on Melville's novel, for the opera by Britten)

## **Collections of essays and broadcasts**

*Abinger Harvest* 1936 · *Two Cheers for Democracy* 1951

## **Literary criticism**

*Aspects of the Novel* 1927 · *The Feminine Note in Literature (posthumous)* 2001

## **Biography**

*Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* 1934 · *Marianne Thornton, A Domestic Biography* 1956

## **Travel writing**

*Alexandria: A History and Guide* 1922 · *Pharos and Pharillon (A Novelist's Sketchbook of Alexandria Through the Ages)* 1923 · *The Hill of Devi* 1953

## **Miscellaneous writings**

*Selected Letters* 1983-1985 · *Commonplace Book* 1985 · *Locked Diary* forthcoming 2007 (held at King's College, Cambridge)

## **Notable films based upon novels by Forster**

- *A Passage to India* (1984), dir. David Lean
- *A Room with a View* (1985), dir. James Ivory

- *Maurice* (1987), dir. James Ivory
- *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1991), dir. Charles Sturridge
- *Howards End* (1992), dir. James Ivory

## Secondary Works on Forster

- Abrams, M.H. and Stephen Greenblatt, "E.M. Forster." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2C., 7th Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000: 2131-2140.
- Ackerley, J. R., *E. M. Forster: A Portrait* (Ian McKelvie, London, 1970)
- Bakshi, Parminder Kaur, *Distant Desire. Homoerotic Codes and the Subversion of the English Novel in E. M. Forster's Fiction* (New York, 1996).
- Beauman, Nicola, *Morgan* (London, 1993).
- Brander, Lawrence, *E.M. Forster. A critical study* (London, 1968).
- Cavaliero, Glen, *A Reading of E.M. Forster* (London, 1979).
- Colmer, John, *E.M. Forster - The personal voice* (London, 1975).
- *E.M. Forster*, ed. by Norman Page, Macmillan Modern Novelists (Houndmills, 1987).
- *E.M. Forster: The critical heritage*, ed. by Philip Gardner (London, 1973).

- *Forster: A collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury (New Jersey, 1966).
- Furbank, P.N., *E.M. Forster: A Life* (London, 1977-1978).
- Haag, Michael, *Alexandria: City of Memory* (London and New Haven, 2004). This portrait of Alexandria during the first half of the twentieth century includes a biographical account of E.M. Forster, his life in the city, his relationship with Constantine Cavafy, and his influence on Lawrence Durrell.
- King, Francis, *E.M. Forster and his World*, (London, 1978).
- Martin, John Sayre, *E.M. Forster. The endless journey* (London, 1976).
- Martin, Robert K. and George Piggford eds., *Queer Forster* (Chicago, 1997)
- Mishra, Pankaj (ed.). "E.M. Forster." *India in Mind: An Anthology*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005: 61-70.
- Scott, P.J.M., *E.M. Forster: Our Permanent Contemporary*, Critical Studies Series (London, 1984).
- Summers, Claude J., *E.M. Forster* (New York, 1983).
- Trilling, Lionel, *E. M. Forster: A Study* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1943).
- Wilde, Alan, *Art and Order. A Study of E.M. Forster* (New York, 1967).



## External links

- Aspects of E.M. Forster
- Howards End Page at Kingwood College Library
- 'Only Connect': The unofficial Forster site
- Pharos: E. M. Forster
- Works by E. M. Forster at Project Gutenberg
- The Paris Review interview with E. M. Forster
- E.M. Forster on GLBTQ
- *With Downcast Gays*, Andrew Hodges and David Hutter, The Gay Liberation pamphlet, (1974)

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