

Questions and Proposals about E. M. Forster's *Maurice*

Note: The edition referred to in the questions below is the Norton paperback edition, issued in 2006. Forster wrote *Maurice* in 1913 and 1914, though the book was not published until 1971.

1. The romantic or fairy-tale-like strain in *Maurice*.

I wonder if others of you recognized a highly romanticized, even chivalric or fairy tale like quality to certain episodes in the novel. I am thinking of how both love affairs--Maurice's with Clive, and Maurice's with Alec--begin with someone climbing into a bedroom window in the night (reminding one perhaps of children's tales involving princesses locked in towers); or of the seemingly mystical powers of the evening primrose; or of the incantatory way Maurice initiates his affair with Alec, which is by going to the window and calling "Come!"

If you do recognize this romantic or chivalric element, why do you think Forster has included it?

2. *Maurice* as a critique of conventional middle-class society.

"After all, is not a real Hell better than a manufactured Heaven?" (215)

This remark falls on page 215 of the Norton 2006 edition, and seems to speak to a proposal running throughout the novel, namely, that in coming into his true sexuality and self, Maurice comes also into a kind of radical understanding of the emotional falsity shot through the conventions by which "normal" or "sanctioned" people live. In this way, the novel seems to offer a critique of the middle class, especially in England, which, in Dr. Lasker Jones's words, has always been "disinclined to accept human nature." (p. 211) (Indeed, in response to this remark, we learn that, "Maurice understood. He was an Englishman himself, and only his troubles had kept him awake." (p. 211))

I wonder if others of you saw the novel as mounting such a critique, and if, like me, you saw the critique of Christianity as part of this larger critique of the English middle class. It does seem that the novel sets up a kind of opposition between, on the one hand, the "greenwood," an Arcadia where freedom and genuine affection are possible, and, on the other hand, the office of Messrs Hill and Hall, the University, the Church (or, more precisely, Reverend Borenius's church)--in other words, the institutions of the

middle-middle class, where the "existence of earth and sky are forgotten" and where "real joy" has never been known.

The passage I am referring to here, in bits and pieces, reads as follows. (It comes late in the novel, after Maurice has tried just about everything possible to "cure" himself, and is coming to realize that his situation is inalterable and enduring.)

"Before his failure with Lasker Jones he had looked forward to work as a privilege of which he was almost unworthy. It was to have rehabilitated him, so that he could hold up his head at home. But now it too crumbled, and again he wanted to laugh, and wondered why he had been taken in so long. The clientele of Messrs Hill and Hall was drawn from the middle-middle classes, whose highest desire seemed shelter—continuous shelter—not a lair in the darkness to be reached against fear, but shelter everywhere and always, until the existence of earth and sky is forgotten, shelter from poverty and disease and violence and impoliteness; and consequently from joy; God slipped this retribution in." (p. 218)

I wonder how others of you responded to this theme in the novel. Do you find the critique restricted to England in the first half of the twentieth century, or do you think it relevant to American culture as well? Did you identify with Maurice's coming-to-consciousness, never mind your sexual orientation? Does this critique, for you, have a universal application?

3. A reconsideration of the proposal above (which concerns the novel's critique of the middle-middle class in England in the early part of the 20th century.)

But then again, maybe I am wrong in describing Maurice as attaining a "radical" freedom (as is proposed in the question above.) Maybe what the novel is saying instead is that true freedom is ultimately impossible because too lonely. It's important, isn't it, that Maurice remains committed to being a "man of his class."

What do you think?

4. Forster's "theology"

I wonder if you were struck by the oddness of the sudden appearance of Maurice's father's ghost. The ghost appears on the bottom of page 151, as Maurice sits in his office working. Here is the passage:

"As he sat in his office working, he could not see the vast curve of his life, still less the ghost of his father sitting opposite. Mr. Hall senior had neither fought nor thought; there had never been any occasion; he had supported society and moved without a crisis from illicit to licit love. Now, looking across at his son, he is touched with envy, the only pain that survives in the world of shades. For he sees the flesh educating the spirit, as his has never

been educated, and developing the sluggish heart and the slack mind against their will." (p. 151)

As we discussed in our last meeting about *A Passage to India*, there seems to be in Forster's novels a mystical dimension that transcends his materialism, and even his stated agnosticism. It's almost as though Forster wants to have it both ways: he wants to respect every single point of view as possessing its own sovereignty, whether the bearer of that point of view believes in God or not; but, seemingly dissatisfied with the limitations of that philosophy, at the same time we see Forster's narrator's offering a god-like knowledge--an omniscient consciousness who sees the "ghosts" his characters do not. In this way, he gets to include in his novels a force larger than any one character--larger, wiser, more forgiving. And smarter, too, for it does seem that in Forster there is an elusive SUPRA-design at work on single character fate, also on the larger narrative outcome. With this supra-design it is as though Forster were signaling the limits of our mental equipment in the governance, even in the perception, of our lives.

What do you think? Do you see this trend in Forster, or do you think I'm being overly optimistic? (Or, maybe you see the trend but think *Forster* is being overly optimistic.)

5. The importance Forster attributes to "friendship"

Friendship, or the importance of having a friend, is obviously an important theme of *Maurice*. Do you see any parallels between Forster's portrayal of friendship in *A Passage to India* and that of *Maurice*?