



«Женская нота» в произведениях Э. М. Форстера

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“The Feminine Note” in E. M. Forster

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается гендерный аспект создания женских образов в романе Э. М. Форстера (1879-1970, Forster) «Хауардз-Энд» (1910, «Howards End»). Особое внимание уделяется использованной в романе технике «ритма».

Abstract

The article examines the gender aspect of female characters' drawing in “Howards End” (1910) by E. M. Forster with an emphasis on the technique of “rhythm” used in the novel.

Ключевые слова: Э. М. Форстер, «Хауардз-Энд», гендерный аспект, женские образы, ритм

Keywords: E. M. Forster, “Howards End”, gender, feminine characters, rhythm

1: Gender Awareness in “Howards End”

It is significant that E. M. Forster's essay “The Feminine Note in Literature” (1910)

anticipating in its “feminism or proto-feminism” [6, p.7] V. Woolf's “A Room of One's Own” (1929) almost immediately followed the publication of “Howards End”. Along with its thematic importance, gender provides the structural principle of the novel. The “masculine” Wilcox clan and all that it stands for – business, imperial interests, “outer life” – is opposed to the educated free-thinking Schlegels, in whose “feminine” house “nothing happened except art and literature...” [3, p.343] Whereas the imagery associated with Howards End, the place of reconciliation and connection, is characterized by certain androgyny: the ancient wych elm “was a comrade, bending over the house... House and tree transcended any similes of sex.” [3, p.378]

Connection (including that of the masculine and the feminine) destined to humanize civilization is the central idea of the novel, to which the appeal of its protagonist Margaret Schlegel, “Only connect...” serves as an epigraph. Although the “feminine” elements of the oppositions to be connected are evidently of greater value to the author than are the “masculine” ones, he emphasizes their complementarity: “...the world would be



a grey, bloodless place were it entirely composed of Miss Schlegels"[3, p.265] with their cult of inner life and personal relations, with their commitment to "temperance, tolerance, and sexual equality ... But the world being what it is, perhaps they shine out in it like stars." [Ibid.] As for the Wilcoxes, their outer life fosters in them "neatness, decision, and obedience, virtues of the second rank, no doubt, but they have formed our civilization." [3, p.313]

The extremes, to which "feminine" and "masculine" houses might come, are demonstrated by two parallel characters, the effeminate Tibby Schlegel and the brutal Charles Wilcox. Incidentally, comparison with Charles helps to add charm to his father, for at the plot level the attempt to connect the Schlegels' liberal humanist values with the Wilcoxes' "grit" is made through the marriage of Margaret and the widowed Henry Wilcox. Margaret becomes the hostess of Howards End that has already been bequeathed to her by the first Mrs Wilcox (nee Howard).

2: Two Mmes Wilcox

Mrs Wilcox is one of the mysterious "prophetic" heroines of Forster, ascending to his "personal cult" of Demeter of Cnidus, "the benevolent mother-deity" who, according to the writer's biographer, "represented for him the reconciliation of male and female in his own nature." [4, vol.1, p.102] In his essay "Cnidus" (1904) Forster writes that Demeter "has transcended sex" [2, p.192], and it is not by chance that he uses the same words for the house and the tree in "Howards End".

When she first appears in the novel Mrs Wilcox is described as belonging "not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it." [3, p.261] After her

death Margaret perceives Mrs Wilcox as a godlike all-pervading presence. "I feel," she says to her sister Helen, "that you and I and Henry are only fragments of that woman's mind. She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house, and the tree that leans over it." [3, p.447]

Her family, who are immune to "the unseen", do not understand that for Mrs Wilcox Howards End was not a house, but "a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir." [3, p.310] What they consider treachery (her "unbusinesslike" will neglected by them) is akin to the silent resistance, with which the fertile soil of Howards End rejects Wilcox improvements: grass springs up "at the very jaws of the garage" [3, p.420]; of the trendy rockery only "bumps" remain.

Mrs Wilcox's "prophetic" silence is characteristic of a traditional woman as well. Seeing in Margaret a kindred spirit, she is also attracted by her ability to use an "unfeminine" tool, language. In her turn, the intellectual and emancipated Margaret brought up by her father, an idealist "countryman of Hegel and Kant" [3, p.265], gradually assimilates Mrs Wilcox's maternal legacy of silence and intuition. During this merging she imperceptibly acquires Mrs Wilcox's sliding gait and the Demeter attributes constantly accompanying her. In the last chapter of the novel the symbolic bunch of grass is in Helen's hands. The sisters share Mrs Wilcox's roles: Helen becomes a mother, Margaret a wife and, more importantly, the guardian of Howards End. Rejecting gender stereotypes, the sisters choose to "develop what you have" as "part of the battle against sameness." [3, p.462]

3: The Perils of Connecting

Unlike Mrs Wilcox, who is inseparable from her symbolic surroundings, and the Schlegel sisters, who are described with



impressionistic strokes, the “masculine” characters (including women) are portrayed in the traditional realistic vein. A specific construction of the forehead, “box-like” in Charles, resembling a fortress in Henry, reminds one of the famous “Forsythe chin”. The recurrent metaphors stress the “obtuseness” which proves impenetrable for Margaret’s message of connection. Even in the utopian ending of the novel Henry is shattered by his son’s imprisonment rather than converted to Margaret’s faith. Perhaps their reconciliation is as much hope against logic as the future existence of Howards End threatened by the “creeping” London, the embodiment of urbanized modernity’s shapeless “flux”.

Howards End is envisaged as a small homeland which should unite all the best that old yeoman England and the European cultural tradition can give. It is to be inherited by the son of Helen Schlegel and Leonard Bast, a clerk whose ancestors worked on the land. Hence, “baby”, who significantly has no name, connects all the strata of English society. Still, in terms of the plot Howards End is ultimately a refuge, both for its inhabitants and for the author himself.

4: Rhythm vs. Plot

If the sought-for synthesis is achieved, it is due to the form of the novel, in which connection becomes a mode of writing. In “Howards End” Forster for the first time uses on the major scale the technique of “rhythm” that in his literary critical work “Aspects of the Novel” (1927) he defines as “repetition plus variation” and the symphonic effect of the whole achieved by the “rhythmic” relation of its parts [1, p.115-116].

Helen Schlegel is the most obvious musical “feminine note” in “Howards End”. Through her perception the reader is given an interpretation of Beethoven's

Fifth Symphony stating the key leitmotifs of the novel and attracting attention to its sonata form, with exposition, development and recapitulation being punctuated by Helen’s and Margaret’s visits to Howards End. The last chapter of the novel brings back the first one by the unity of time and place (Howards End in June), and the final repetition of the themes and symbols that have been varied throughout the book.

Recurring situations, images and key phrases, connecting and modifying different contexts, create an undercurrent that accompanies the surface plot of the novel. It is this “second” plot that serves as the principal agent of connection between realistically depicted characters inhabiting the masculine “time of history and progress, a time both linear and goal-oriented” [5, p.15], and the symbolic feminine space of the eternal present. Thus Margaret’s capability “of achieving a new sort of synthesis between the hitherto polarized codes of femininity and masculinity” [5, p.4] is paralleled and supported by the possibilities of modernist narrative form.

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