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Constructing the Narrative: E.M. Forster's Critical Vision in Aspects of the Novel

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Abstract

Aspects of the Novel, deriving from E.M. Forster's 1927 lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, delineates seven essential features he regards as integral to understanding and crafting the English novel. These components—story, people, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm—are explored in this essay through fresh vocabulary and organization, retaining the foundational quotations and sources of the original study. Forster's approach transcends the historical lineage of novel-writing and continues to inform literary theory today.

Keywords: E.M. Forster, novel theory, characterization, narrative structure, prophecy, pattern, rhythm

Introduction

Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970) stands as a formidable presence in twentieth-century English literature, recognized for novels that candidly critique social stratification and hypocrisy. His impulse toward empathy is memorably encapsulated in the *Howards End* epigraph: “Only connect” (Forster, *Howards End*). His upbringing, influenced by his benefactor and great-aunt Marianne Thornton, enabled a literary career furnished with economic stability and intellectual nurture.

Among Forster's many literary contributions, *Aspects of the Novel*—originating as the Clark lectures—marks a milestone in novel criticism. It departs from strictly historical criticism, positing instead that “all novelists throughout history [are] writing simultaneously, side by side” (“E.M. Forster”). Through this lens, Forster identifies seven critical aspects of the novel: story, character, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm.

Forster's Life and Literary Trajectory

Born in London, Forster's early years at Rooksnest shaped his creative worldview. After completing his studies, he traveled widely, eventually producing major novels such as *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), and *Howards End* (1910). *A Passage to India* (1924), perhaps his best-known work, examines the complex interplay between East and West during the British colonial era. Throughout his



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career, Forster engaged in humanist organizations and was an outspoken adversary of censorship—influences that resonated in his writing and activism .

The Seven Pillars of the Novel

Story

Forster identifies storytelling as the underpinning of every novel, asserting, “the novel tells a story” Narrative here is defined by ordered events that spark reader curiosity—the essential “weapon of suspense.” Forster casts this as the “backbone of the novel,” arguing that, while the chronological arrangement of events is rudimentary, it remains critical for reader engagement. The narrative, however, is not inherently meaningful; real life is differentiated from story by the value we assign experiences, whereas the novel foregrounds the mere fact of event-sequence, culminating inexorably in death .Storytelling alone, he acknowledges, cannot produce greatness; additional elements are required for a novel to transcend mere narration.

People (Characterization)

Forster also foregrounds the importance of characters by contrasting “homo fictus” (fictional beings) with “homo sapiens” (real people). He isolates the five basic facts of existence—birth, food, sleep, love, and death—arguing that in fiction, some elements such as love are exaggerated and others marginalized. “Sometimes characters can seem to be more real than the people around us are, and this is because a novelist is able to reveal the character’s hidden life,” Forster states . His well-known distinction between “flat” and “round” characters forms a cornerstone of modern narrative analysis. Flat characters can be encapsulated in a single proposition and seldom evolve, while round characters are dynamic, capable of surprising the reader by consistent development. Forster observes: “A really flat character can be expressed in one sentence... A round character by contrast has further dimensions to their personality, which are revealed as events demand them” (Roberts and Jacobs 140). The balance between flat and round character enriches the texture of a successful novel.

Plot

Plot, for Forster, is more than sequence; it thrives on causality. He famously differentiates: “The king died and then the queen died” (a story); “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” (a plot). The “why” of events, not just the “what,” is crucial to plot’s construction He disputes Aristotle’s reliance on action for drama, asserting that novels penetrate the “unexpressed, inner existence” of characters. Plot accommodates intelligence and memory, requiring the reader to discover and connect facts distributed across the narrative. Nevertheless, Forster warns, “Sometimes a plot triumphs too completely,” overwhelming the authenticity of character.

Fantasy and Prophecy

Fantasy incorporates the improbable, the magical, and even the mythological—ranging from ghosts to journeys into alternate realms. “Fantasy implies the supernatural, but it may do this by



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no more than simply hinting through a magical quality in events” (“Aspects of the Novel summary”). Forster includes parody and adaptation as forms of fantasy that fuel artistic invention.

Prophecy, on the other hand, is described as the “tone of voice” or the “song” through which the author’s vision of the universe emerges into the ordinary world of fiction. It “demands of the reader both humility and the suspension of a sense of humor.” Prophecy is not the same as symbolism; rather, it “connects us with the history of humankind,” imbuing ordinary events and characters with a sense of the infinite (“Aspects of the Novel summary”). Figures like Melville and Dostoyevsky epitomize the capacity of prophecy to evoke universal truths.

Pattern and Rhythm

Pattern refers to the deliberate arrangement of elements within the novel, much like architecture. “Pattern is an aesthetic aspect of the novel... nourished by anything in the novel—any character, scene, word,” Forster writes (Cuddon). Geometry and symmetry, for example, contribute to narrative design, though the danger, Forster cautions, is that life’s richness is lost when stories are forced into artificial patterns.

Rhythm operates more musically: Forster characterizes it as “repetition plus variation.” Motifs reappear with subtle changes, lending unity and energy to the novel without diminishing the authenticity of characters. Rhythm enhances aesthetic pleasure and gives a novel an “open-ended” feel, as “by its lovely waxing and waning [it] fill[s] us with surprise and freshness and hope” (“Aspects of the Novel”).

Conclusion

Aspects of the Novel remains an essential reference text for novelists and critics alike. Forster’s articulation of the novel’s architecture emphasizes both narrative technique and the novelist’s inward vision. His distinctions between flat and round characters, his theory of plot as causality, and his suggestive ideas of prophecy and rhythm have left a lasting impression on literary criticism (“Aspects of the Novel”). Forster’s informal yet probing lectures encourage today’s readers and writers to reflect on not only how stories are told, but also why novels endure as vessels of human experience.

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