

### **Study materials for *Howards End*.**

Because the following document is pretty long, I'm going to telegraph here what the questions are about, so you can go to the ones that interest you.

--Question 1 concerns Margaret's feeling that "independent thoughts" require "independent means" and considers that proposal across the novel generally.

--Question 2 concerns the novel's critique of liberal intellectual charity and is most particularly about the realities of Leonard Bast's life.

--Questions 3, 4, and 5 are about Ruth Wilcox and her friendship with Margaret. Question 5 asks whether there's a connection between Ruth in "The Book of Ruth" in the Old Testament and Ruth Wilcox.

--Question 6 is about sex and nature and why it is that Forster seems to value them so highly.

--Question 7 is about the significance of the "goblin" in Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony (the motif of Chapter 5). It is a follow-up question to the ones we asked about the "ou-boum" sound in the Marabar caves of *A Passage to India*.

--Question 8 is about the evidently artificial quality to Forster's way of novel-writing and how it's consistent with his project generally.

#### **1. Who Gets to Have a Great Mind; and, following from this, The Way Margaret Schlegel Thinks**

On p. 57 of *Howards End*, just after we have met him and followed him to Wickham place, where he has ventured to retrieve his, in Helen's words, "appalling" umbrella, and after he and his wife,

Jacky, have eaten a supper of “soup square” and “tongue,” Leonard Bast, in his “dark” and “stuffy” flat, sits down at his upright piano.

“He went to the piano and jingled out a little Grieg. He played badly and vulgarly, but the performance was not without its effect, for Jacky said she thought she’d be going to bed. As she receded, a new set of interests possessed the boy, and he began to think of what had been said about music by that odd Miss Schlegel—the one that twisted her face about so when she spoke. Then the thoughts grew sad and envious. There was the girl named Helen, who had pinched his umbrella, and the German girl who had smiled at him pleasantly, and Herr someone, and Aunt someone, and the brother—all, all with their hands on the ropes. They had all passed up that narrow, rich staircase at Wickham place, to some ample room, whither he could never follow them, not if he read for ten hours a day. Oh, it was no good; this continual aspiration. Some are born cultured; the rest had better go in for whatever comes easy. To see life steadily and to see it whole was not for the likes of him.” (p. 57)

Understand: this sad estimation of Leonard’s Non-Opportunity comes from Leonard, which is to say that I would attribute that last line in the above paragraph to Leonard’s consciousness, rather than to that of the novel’s narrator. Even so, it does seem that *Howards End* again and again is telling us that if we wish to struggle against “life’s daily greyness,” if we are one of those special people inclined by our very natures to “connect...the prose with the passion,” we’re going to have an awfully hard time doing so if we don’t have money. Certainly Margaret feels this way: in a speech delivered to her discussion group—they have met to debate philanthropic aid to the poor—she repeatedly emphasizes the importance of money, or “independent means,” to the formation of “independent thoughts.”

“The imagination ought to play upon money and realize it vividly, for it’s the—the second most important thing in the world [. . .] so few of us think clearly about our own private incomes, and admit that independent thoughts are in nine cases out of ten the result of independent means.” (p. 133)

One of her many traits that makes Margaret a “heroine”—Helen declares this of Margaret at the end of the book—is that she knows that her specialness derives in large part from good economic fortune. She knows it, and she takes responsibility for it. You may remember the scene early in the book in which Mrs. Wilcox asks Margaret to go with her to Howards End. They have gone Christmas shopping together, and have become friends. At first, Margaret declines the invitation; and as she and Mrs. Wilcox are driven home through the London streets, streets bedecked in a Christmas seemingly without peace—for “the craving for excitement and elaboration had ruined that blessing”—Margaret turns what could end in cynicism merely about the holiday upon herself. “Goodwill?” she thinks. “Had she seen any example of it in the hordes of purchasers? Or in herself? She had failed to respond to this invitation merely because it was a little queer and imaginative—she, whose birthright it was to nourish the imagination!” (p. 88).

“She, whose birthright it was to nourish the imagination.” In my experience, anyway, there aren’t many people out there who treat their imaginative virtuosity as a “birthright.” You may disagree with me, of course, but as I understand Margaret, “independent thinking” is not something Margaret undertakes because it’s going to distinguish her from other people—make her seem better than them, or more attractive. It’s something she does precisely to erase that distinction. The possession and

nourishment of the imagination is for Margaret the surest way to know others' minds as sympathetically and as justly as possible.

I've often thought that one of Forster's aims in writing *Howards End* was to create the most delicately perceptive and loving mind he was capable of—in other words, to create a person who would never disappoint him. Following from this rather kooky proposal is a series of questions:

- a. What is Margaret's mind like? How does it think? Pay attention to the way Margaret pays attention, and you may come up with some concrete answers. Learn from her. She is a good teacher.
- b. Do you agree that she's a good teacher? Why or why not?
- c. Of course, she does disappoint us—she marries Henry Wilcox. Why? This question has social implications as well as emotional ones. What are the social implications? What are the emotional ones? How do they intersect?

**2. But maybe books and articulateness *don't* always aid in bringing us closer to others or knowing them better.**

For me, one of the saddest, most affecting moments in *Howards End*—indeed in any novel I know—comes at the conclusion of Leonard's visit with the Schlegel sisters—the happy, second one during which he tells them about his night-long walking journey through London. The visit is ending, the sisters are besieging Leonard with their hectically loquacious kindness, and he can't get out the door. "Oh, bother, not to say dash—I had forgotten we were dining out; but do, do come round again and have a talk," urges Helen. "Yes, you must-do," echoes Margaret. But Leonard,

“with extreme sentiment,” tells them, “No.” “It is better not to risk a second interview,” he says. “Things,” he says, “so often get spoiled” (pp. 128 – 129).

We then shift from dramatic scene to an expositional treatment of the reasons behind Leonard’s reticence. It is during this exposition that Leonard is able to recover that sovereignty of personhood and history that the Schlegels’ always well-intentioned-- but perhaps patronizing--solicitude may have threatened. We learn a bit about Leonard’s past experience with those with “fuller, happier lives” than his own.

“Perhaps the keenest happiness he had ever known was during a railway journey to Cambridge, where a decent-mannered undergraduate had spoken to him. They had got into a conversation, and gradually Leonard flung reticence aside, told someone of his domestic troubles, and hinted at the rest. The undergraduate, supposing they could start a friendship, asked him to ‘coffee after hall,’ which he accepted, but afterwards grew shy, and took care not to stir from the commercial hotel where he lodged. He did not want Romance to collide with the Porphyryon, still less with Jacky, and people with fuller, happier lives are slow to understand this. To the Schlegels, as to the undergraduate, he was an interesting creature, of whom they wanted to see more. But they to him were denizens of Romance, who must keep to the corner he had assigned them, pictures that must not walk out of their frames” (p. 128).

The juxtaposition here—between what the Schlegel sisters assume Leonard wants from them, and what he actually does—is painfully striking. The Schlegels are guilty of a misapprehension I myself have been guilty of more times than I’d like to admit: they’ve assumed that Leonard, whom they can easily see leads a less “full and happy” life than their own, wants and will continue to want every ounce of the liberally-minded benevolence they’re going to foist and foist upon him until he finally turns and runs. It’s not

necessarily that the Schlegels have disregarded Leonard's reality, or the hardships that make it, in particular the precariousness of his job and the onerousness of his marriage, which Forster implies was made more out of obligation than of love. It's rather that, being liberal intellectuals, they assume Leonard is going to be only or chiefly *grateful* for what they have to give, in the simple way a very hungry person will be grateful for food. We might even say that it's the imperative to *be benevolent* that prevents them from imagining that Leonard may be more than simply needful—that he may have his own designs on life, his own canny intelligence, an intelligence as vivid and creative—even as potent—as their own.

It seems that what Forster wishes to show us through the example of Leonard are the limits of the liberal intellectual's actual effects on those he supports and patronizes. It also seems that he regards the kind of articulateness Margaret must practice, on some level, anyway, so as to get closer to people—to communicate with them--as ironically a barrier between herself and those who do not speak in the same way that she does.

Do you agree with these remarks? Disagree? What are your thoughts on the matter?

### **3. What Margaret inherits from Ruth Wilcox**

This question is posed like a riddle, because the riddle form may get you thinking in new ways.

We could say that Margaret inherits three things from Ruth Wilcox.

She inherits *Howards End*.

She inherits Henry Wilcox, Ruth's husband.

What is the third thing that Margaret inherits from Ruth Wilcox—and, how does that third thing come to her?

**4. How is Ruth Wilcox the novel's most "successful" character**

Maybe, for you, it is Ruth Wilcox's lessons that are the most lasting and useful of all the characters in *Howards End*. Maybe *she* is the teacher. Lionel Trilling, in his 1943 monograph on Forster, describes her as the novel's most "successful" character. It's an oddly cold description, isn't it—it rings of professional and economic striving, neither of which Ruth has any experience with.

Do you agree with Trilling? Do you think her "successful?" Why or why not?

**5. How is Ruth Wilcox's plight like that of the Ruth in the Old Testament?**

Do you see any similarities between the Ruth of the Old Testament and Ruth Wilcox? Do you think Forster means for you to make that connection? Why or why not?

**6. The realms of sex and nature: Why does Forster value them so highly?**

At the end of our last meeting, which was about Forster's novel, *Maurice*, one book group member made an interesting remark that will perhaps draw a connection between *Maurice* and *Howards End* and show something of Forster's project generally. She said something like--and I'm paraphrasing wildly here--that if God is to be found in *Maurice*, or, if Maurice himself finds anything like God in the course of his story, it's through physical experience—through sex and through the life of the body. It does seem that

Forster values physical life very highly. In *Howards End*, both sexuality and the natural world—in particular, the country—draw Helen and Margaret out of the library, we might say, or out the concert hall, into classrooms that will affect their lives significantly more than did the library or the concert hall.

Do you agree with that last statement? And, if you agree that Forster values the physical realm(s), what, for him, do those realms have to offer that the more cerebral or intellectual realms do not? (By the way, it's very easy to answer this question in the abstract, meaning, without reference to the particular world of *Howards End*. So, please try and stay close to the text as you answer it.)

Another way to get at this question about the physical realm is again to quote Lionel Trilling, who writes that, "*Howards End* is not only a novel of the class war but of the war between men and women." It does seem that Helen and Margaret, with their discussion groups and talk of "personal relations," belong to a "feminine" world, and that the Wilcox men offer a kind of correction to whatever errors one may make in dwelling in the world of the feminine over much. (As a feminist, I loathed writing that last sentence, but I'm trying to provoke you (and me) into a lively discussion.) Or, at least we could say that the *characters* seem to invest these two worlds—the Schlegel "discussion group" world, and the Wilcox anger-and-telegram world—with meanings having to do with gender.

What do you think? Also, do you think the Wilcox men end up delivering what Margaret hopes they will deliver? Are they, in the end, so formidably "masculine?"

## **7. A question about the "goblin" in Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony.**

The following question concerns Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony, which, as you know, plays a fairly significant role in the elaboration of many of the novel's themes. (The symphony can be heard all through the movie version of *Howards End* as well.)

Fairly early in the Beethoven chapter (which is Chapter 5), Helen, as she listens to a performance of the symphony, hears "goblins" [. . .] "walking quietly over the universe, from end to end." In her mind, these goblins are "not aggressive creatures." "They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour and heroism in the world" (p. 34).

I wonder if those of you who have read *A Passage to India*, either with the All Souls Book Group or on your own, saw an equivalence between the "ou-boum" in the Marabar Caves (in *A Passage to India*) and Beethoven's "goblins" (in *Howards End*.) The "ou-boum," if you'll recall, signified to the otherwise strong and spirited Mrs. Moore the following abysmal meaning: "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." Both sounds seem to represent a kind of vanishing point in which humankind's best and most noble aspirations no longer have any power.

And so I'm going to pose the same question of the "goblin" that I posed of the "ou-boum": If the "goblin" does not prevail in the world of this novel, what does? Be specific. The answer may be more complex and nuanced—more social, really—than simply "love" or, in Forster's parlance, "affectionate relations." It does seem that Forster believes very strongly in love, but he is a realist about love, too. *How* is he a realist? Another way to ask this question: Given what you know of Forster so far, what is it about

his artistic vision—his way of seeing the world--that requires the repeated acknowledgement of the *absence* of human meaning?

### **8. *Howards End* as evidently a work of artifice. Why?**

As was true in a *Passage to India*, the novel's narrator plays a fairly prominent role in our experience of the story. Every now and then he sort of pops in, at the edge of the proscenium, we might say, to comment on what's going on, or to summarize what's just happened, or even to explain why he's featuring one element of the story as opposed to another. The effect is comic. He's also not above exaggeration or implausibility. Let me give you an example.

It's the middle of the novel—Margaret has not become involved with Henry yet, nor have Helen and Margaret become friends with Leonard. We're in the Schlegel living-room; Margaret is chatting with Tibby about their travel plans for the summer.

“...there's no reason we shouldn't have a house in the country and also a flat in town, provided we all stick together and contribute. Though of course—Oh, how does one Maunder on, and to think, to think of the people who are really poor. How do they live? Not to move about the world would kill me.’

As she spoke, the door was flung open, and Helen burst in a state of extreme excitement. ‘Oh, my dears, what do you think?...A woman's been here asking me for her husband...Yes, for her husband, and it really is so” (p. 117).

Here is Margaret, whose consciousness is so finely tuned and so well nourished that it can barely utter a word without considering the implications of that word, ruminating out loud about a kind of person she herself would claim she's ineligible to understand, when Bam!—the door opens and exactly what she's

been theorizing about turns out moments ago to have been living and breathing at the bottom of her stairs. That Helen's news of Jacky's arrival comes at exactly the moment the words "really poor" fly out of Margaret's mouth draws the band of the fiction around these characters lives more tightly. We sense them as fated to Forster's fiction; and we sense the novel not as a transparent window onto a world as "real" as our own, but as an artificial, meaning, *made* thing--as evidently "made" as the toy-box colored proscenium of a puppet show.

Why do you think Forster wants this "artificial" effect? Why would he want you to be aware that his characters and his fiction is are "made" things? This question is designed for those of you who are especially interested in the craft of fiction—meaning, those of you who read a lot of it, or those of you who write it.

**Lastly, some reflections on the practice of close reading:**

When, last April, Brian and I first started talking about the Kay Falk Literary Project (of which the All Souls Book Group is a significant part, probably THE significant part), one of the things we said we wanted the Project to accomplish was instruction in a closer kind of reading, on the idea that close reading can be thought of as a "spiritual practice." I was reminded of this element of the Kay Falk project by a paragraph from *Howards End* about Margaret Shlegel. Here's the paragraph. (Just so you know where we are: Margaret, not yet married to Henry, has just visited *Howards End* for the first time.)

Her evening was pleasant. The sense of flux which had haunted her all the year disappeared for a time. She forgot the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much

and connect so little. She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from Howards End, she attempted to realize England. She failed—visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. But an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable. Helen and her father had known this love, poor Leonard Bast was groping after it, but it had been hidden from Margaret till this afternoon. It had certainly come through the house and old Miss Avery. Through them: the notion of “through” persisted; her mind trembled towards a conclusion which only the unwise have put into words. Then, veering back into warmth, it dwelt on ruddy bricks, flowering plum-trees, and all the tangible joys of spring.

What Margaret is doing here is not unlike what the close reader does, which is to resist forming grand summarizing reactions until one has thought “through” tangible experience. Margaret is of course not reading at this moment—she is rather, well, feeling love, and staying with the feeling not by thinking up and above it, rather by attending to its “tangible joys”: ruddy bricks, flowering plum trees. So, too, as we read, let’s try and stay low to the ground (or brick), low to the text, I mean, basing all our comments and reactions on a faithful apprenticeship to its complex and obdurate life. May we be the “gentle reader” Forster had in mind as he wrote his novels; or, may we be members of the “aristocracy of affectionate relations” with which he peopled his soul. May we be Fieldings, may we be Dr. Azizes, may we be Mrs. Moores, may we be Maurices, may we be Leonards, may we be Margarets!

Best to you,

Emilie

