

Study Questions for E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

(For users of this website: the pages numbers indicated below refer to the Harvest Book (Harcourt) 1965 edition of the novel (which was originally published in 1924).)

Question #1: The Novel's Point of View

One of the most remarkable things about E. M. Forster's fiction is his management of what is called "point of view." Some of you, I'm guessing, know what "point of view" is in fiction, and some do not. So I'm just going to sketch out a definition here. You'll see why this is an important issue in the understanding of Forster's novels once the definition veers toward him—which, I promise, it will soon.

In literature, "point of view" is very simply the point of view from which the story is told. It's who's telling the story, and how much he or she knows about that story. For the moment, I'm going to describe the two points of view from which novels and stories are most commonly written--first person point of view, and third person point of view. I'm also going to refer to some novels told from those points of view so as to shape your understanding of the matter with concrete examples. (The novels I'll refer to we have already read at The Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, North Carolina.)

A. *First person point of view* is the "I" point of view. Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* is told in the first person, and so is Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and her *Gilead*. Some first person narrators hold highly ironical attitudes towards their lives and towards the relative usefulness of telling the stories of their lives—and here I think of Binx Bolling in the *Moviegoer*, or of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*--and some are more sincere

about the enterprise--and here I think of John Ames in *Gilead*, and of Ruth in *Housekeeping*.

B. *Third person point of view* is probably the most complex point of view in fictional literature, and this is because it involves *two* subjectivities rather than just one: the subjectivity of the character (or characters) who are living the story, and the subjectivity of the narrator who is talking about that character or characters from outside of them.

As many of you know, *A Passage to India* is told in the third person point of view, or more specifically, it is told in what is called the “omniscient” third person point of view. What we mean when we say “omniscient” is that the narrator of *A Passage to India* appears to know everything there is to know about his characters and the universe they inhabit, almost as though he were a god.

I should say here that not all third person narratives are omniscient. Many of the stories of Ernest Hemingway, for instance, are told in what is called the *objective* third person point of view, meaning that the narrator is telling us what the characters are doing and saying, but not what they’re thinking and feeling. He’s not going inside their heads; he’s rather sitting outside them and simply recording their actions and words, almost as though he were a movie camera at the edge of a set. Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” a short story I’m assuming many of you have read, is a classic example of third person objective point of view.

Also, it’s quite possible to tell a story in the third person point of view that reveals only *one* character’s thoughts and feelings, as opposed to all the characters’ thoughts and feelings. Flannery O’Connor wrote several stories this way. “Good Country People,” for instance, only tells you what poor Joy/Hulga is thinking, which increases our sympathy for her, for hers is the only heart we understand. William Trevor often writes this way; so does Alice Munro; so does Anton Chekhov.

I should also make this important distinction: a third person narrator is not the same person as the author. Many readers—including me—often make this mistake. Even so, when Forster decides to write his novel from the third person point of view, he creates a kind of personality, like yours or mine, from which to view his story. A personality informed, like yours or mine, by region, class, institutional background, and so forth. If you “listen” carefully to a narrator like Forster’s, or to the fictional narrators upon which he must have modeled his own—and here I’m thinking in particular of the narrators of George Eliot’s novels—you’ll hear a distinctive sensibility which, like ours, holds certain values as opposed to others, has spent time with certain classes of people as opposed to others, who has been educated at certain kinds of institutions as opposed to others, and so forth. This is to say that the “wisdom” of this narrator has been seasoned in the heart and mind over a lifetime of *social*—not just spiritual, not just familial—intercourse. (By the way, I would argue that the great omniscient narrators, such as Forster’s or Henry James’s or George Eliot’s, are not specifically gendered, though some would disagree with me.)

Okay, back to *A Passage to India*. My reason for explaining, however briefly, this amazing technical device called “point of view” is to show you just what an important decision an author makes when she decides who’s going to tell her story. Imagine, for instance, that Forster had chosen to tell *A Passage to India* only from Aziz’s point of view. (The mere mortal, such as myself, would have told the story this way, and, despite her best intentions, written a very headachey book.) Or, imagine that Forster told the story of *A Passage to India* only from Mrs. Moore’s point of view. From Miss Quested’s. From Fielding’s. I exemplify my argument with these four characters rather than, for instance, the character of Ronny Heaslop, because all four are exceptionally well-intentioned and responsible, meaning that all four would do their best to represent the realities of those around them with justice and sympathy.

However, each of them is only one person, meaning that no matter how great the drive within him or her to understand the truth—"I want to see the *real* India," exclaims Miss Quested in the novel's opening pages—he or she is also driven ineluctably by the biases of personal history, race, religion, gender, nation and class.

So, the first very fundamental question we could ask as we try to get on terms with this novel is why it was that Forster elected to represent all points of view with equal patience, sympathy and respect. Remember: every one and every thing in this novel gets its just due, even the callous Ronny. Ronny is no straw man. On page 52 of the Harvest Book edition, the edition presumably many of you have purchased at Accent on Books, you'll find the narrator taking pains to show his reader just what Ronny is up against day to day as he "works hard in the court trying decide which of two untrue accounts was the less untrue." Here is Ronny exasperated as he tries to defend his behavior to his mother:

"Oh, look here," he broke out, rather pathetically, "what do you and Adela want me to do? Go against my class, against all the people I respect and admire out here? Lose such power as I have for doing good in this country because my behaviour isn't pleasant? You neither of you understand what work is, or you'd never talk such eyewash. I hate talking like this, but one must occasionally. It's morbidly sensitive to go on as Adela and you go...I'm not a missionary or a Labour member or a vague sentimental sympathetic literary man. I'm just a servant of the Government; it's the profession you wanted me to choose myself, and that's that. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do." (p. 52, *A Passage to India*, A Harvest Book edition, 1984 (novel originally published in 1924))

In Ronny's mind, it is his job to respond to the people he encounters with some measure of callousness, for to respond with the kind of sympathy that, ironically, his narrator has shown *him*, would necessitate making radical changes to the legal system that employs him.

Being a young man, and needing to prove his mettle to his superiors, he's not going to do that. (Of course, one could easily say to him, Well, if your work is corrupting your spirit, then you've got to get out of it and do something else. You've got to teach, or go be a doctor, or become a priest, or run for civil service, or write brave exposés of imperialist exploitation." But that still leaves the problem of who will run the courts, which then raises the supra-problem of how to run them more humanely—not an insoluble problem, maybe, but a very real and embedded and historical one. It does seem that it's this real-ness and embedded-ness—and how they influence everyone who is part of that system, whether they're aware that they're part of it or not--that Forster is directing us toward.)

So, as I say, that's the first part of this question regarding point of view: *Why has Forster elected to represent the minds and hearts of every one of his characters? More particularly, what is it about the subject of his novel that has occasioned this "omniscient" point of view, that requires it?*

And that's probably not a very difficult question to answer. But, as many of you may realize as you're finishing the book, the narrator's point of view includes more than just character behavior and psychology. There are also those many descriptions of the environs of Chandrapore, in particular of the Marabar Caves--with which, as you may remember, the novel opens. This is a narrator who's moving all over the place with the swiftness and authority of the eye of a god. Yet this is also a narrator who talks about God, and this is also a narrator who is showing us people. . .who are talking about God. And gods. And Gods. This is a narrator who sounds like someone I know (or someone I wish I knew!)—someone who shares my values, who trusts I bear precisely the kind of intelligence to find his observations true and worthwhile, who expects I bear precisely the sense of humor to find his jokes and asides funny, but who nonetheless goes roaming around in places no one in the story,

indeed no one on earth, has seen or smelled or touched, to tell me what they look like and smell like and feel like. What is up? Who *is* this guy?

I'll give you an example of this omniscience at its most "OM," at its most comprehensive and powerful. It comes late in the novel, so, those of you reading these study materials who aren't yet finished with the book should now. . . go finish the book. What I'd like to direct you toward is a whole, though comparatively short, chapter that begins, in the Harvest Book edition, on p. 284. Mrs. Moore has died; she has in fact died several chapters back, though the narrator has delayed telling us what happened to her until this moment. I'll quote the first paragraph of the chapter for those of you working from different editions than my own:

"Dead she was—committed to the deep while still on the southward track, for the boats from Bombay cannot point towards Europe until Arabia has been rounded; she was further in the tropics than ever achieved while on shore, when the sun touched her for the last time and her body was lowered into yet another India—the Indian Ocean. She left behind her sore discomfort, for a death gives a ship a bad name. Who was this Mrs. Moore? When Aden was reached, Lady Mellanby cabled, wrote, did all that was kind, but the wife of a Lieutenant-Governor does not bargain for such an experience; and she repeated: "I had only seen the poor creature for a few hours when she was taken ill; really this has been needlessly distressing, it spoils one's homecoming." A ghost followed the ship up the Red Sea, but failed to enter the Mediterranean. Somewhere about Suez there is always a social change: the arrangements of Asia weaken and those of Europe begin to be felt, and during the transition Mrs. Moore was shaken off. At Port Said the grey blustery north began. The weather was so cold and bracing that the passengers felt it must have broken in the land they had left, but it became hotter steadily there in accordance with its usual law." (p. 284, *A Passage to India*, Harvest Book Edition, 1984 (1924))

A heartbreaking passage, whose particular way with heartbreak—whose pathos, we might say—we could talk about at some length, so richly has Forster considered the many discrepant meanings of Moore's death to those who will encounter it. The moment I'd like to underscore

is the one in which the narrator moves, without segue or incident, from Lady Mellanby's rather shrivel-hearted response to the "ghost" who "followed the ship up the Red Sea, but failed to enter the Mediterranean." Ghost? As you know, the word "ghost" has been on the lips of many of the novel's characters, both Indian and English, since the novel's first pages. And it has been a dirty word for many of them, in particular for Aziz, who considers any talk of the supernatural a kind of disease that keeps the Indian from modernizing and, in effect, catching up to the English. But here is the narrator asserting the existence of Mrs. Moore's ghost with the plainness of factual reportage. So this is a narrator who not only knows everything there is to know about the physical realms of his created world, but everything there is to know about the metaphysical realms as well. It seems that every time the field of the possible in this novel gets bigger, every time it expands to include something else, the narrator makes sure it expands further still: beyond the arch another arch, and another arch, and so on. I think of the description of the sky in Chapter I and how it seems to summarize the ever-broadening reach of the narrative consciousness of the novel.

By day the blue will pale down into white where it touches the white of the land, after sunset it has a new circumference—orange, melting upwards into tenderest purple. But the core of blue persists, and so it is by night. Then the stars hang like lamps from the immense vault. The distance between the vault and them is as nothing to the distance behind them, and that farther distance, though beyond colour, last freed itself from blue." (Harvest Edition, p. 5)

Please note also where this chapter ends: in Ronny's mind, as he reasons away his sorrow at his mother's death. How quickly we move from vast physical landscapes to vast metaphysical landscapes to the narrow chambers of Ronny's heart. A virtuosic chapter, really—and a demonstration piece in the sweeping powers of Forster's narrator.

Why? Why does the subject of this novel need this omniscient an omniscience to work? Why is this the only narrative engine that will make

this novel go? Think about it between now and the time we meet, and so will I, for I don't really know the answer myself.

It also seems that Forster's choice to tell the story in the omniscient point of view has to do with his ultimate reluctance to name any one god, Christian, Hindu, Moslem, or any other, as the true god. *So, how do you think A Passage to India's narrative point of view relates to, or results from (or not) its tolerant, all-inclusive—and ultimately muddled—portrait of the divine?*

Here is a sub-question: What's wrong with muddle? Why is muddle so difficult to tolerate? Why do we work as hard as we do to un-muddle the muddle? Should we? And, do we really have a choice?

Another sub-question: Do you think Forster would be able to write a similar kind of narrator now? By this is meant: Do you think he'd be able to write an "omniscient" narrator in the current literary culture? In the current multi-cultural culture? This question will become especially pertinent in a couple of months when we read Zadie Smith's On Beauty, which was published in 2004, and which is, among other splendors, an homage to Forster and his way of writing novels.

Lastly, a suggestion for private reflection:

Maybe it's just because I've tried my hand at writing fiction, but I have found that one interesting way to get to know someone is to imagine writing a story about him or her and, in the process, deciding which point of view best corresponds to his or her life, milieu, psychology, what have you. I invite you to do the same with someone you find especially impressive, mysterious, affecting. What is the right point of view for that person?

Lastly, imagine that you are narrator to your own life. Are you a fair one?

Question #2: Perception and Language, or the "Ou-Boum"

As many of you know, at the center of the novel is its most important event: the expedition to the Marabar Caves. It is here that Adela and Mrs. Moore hear an “echo” that will haunt them for several weeks afterwards—in Mrs. Moore’s case, it will haunt her for the rest of her life. What follows is Mrs. Moore’s rumination about the echo just moments after she has heard it:

“The more she thought about it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became. She minded it much more now than at the time. The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at the moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, “Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value.” If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same—“ou-boum.” If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they doge or bluff—it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind.” (p. 165)

Last Sunday in Adult Forum (Oct. 1), as part of his series on “Mystery, Faith and Doubt,” Todd talked about doubt, about those times in our lives when we find ourselves in a kind of “wilderness” where, unable to mobilize truths we thought were permanent, we’re challenged to our very core. The passage cited above seems like a good description of such a wilderness. It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it, that a narrator as comfortable and as almost athletically capable with his language should nonetheless insist that at the center of his narrative should ring a sound that isn’t language at all but rather its negation. As Mrs. Moore exclaims

bitterly several pages later, “Say, say, say. As if anything can be said! I have spent my life in saying or in listening to sayings; I have listened too much. It is time I was left in peace.” (p. 222). The “real” India, if that’s what the “ou-boum” is, is not say-able, at least not by Westerners inclined to believe that all phenomena can eventually be represented, and, in the representing, mastered. Let us then propose *A Passage to India* as a radical interrogation of all language and representation, even that of Christianity. An interrogation that almost, *almost*, results in the dissolution of everything one might hold dear, guiding, fortifying, redeeming.

But, as you know, the story doesn’t end in dissolution. Do you agree? Disagree? If you agree, what do you think is the redeeming force that saves Forster’s characters from overwhelming despair?

Please answer this question, if you have the time, with consistent reference to the text.

Another way to ask this question: Do you think Forster believes there’s anything stronger than the “ou-boum”? If so, what is that stronger thing?

Question #3: The Novel’s “plasticity” and how our experience of it can shape our understanding of the novel’s meaning.

The most recent airing of “Speaking of Faith,” on Monday, October 2, featured Paul Elie, an editor at Farrar, Straus, Giroux who, as some of you know, wrote a quadruple biography of four Catholic American writers: Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy. The show was structured as a mosaic of remarks about literature and faith, remarks both of Elie’s and the authors he’s written about. One remark, by Walker Percy, stood out for me as helpful in my understanding of *A Passage to India*.

A good novel is like a good table. The parts have to fit; it has to work, that is, sit

foursquare and at the right level. And it has to please. Its truth lies in the way it looks, feels, hefts—the touch and the grain of the thing. Its morality follows from the form and the excellence of the thing. That is to say, its morality comes from within, follows naturally from its making and is not imposed from without. It does not preach.

What I'm about to say, as I build on the Percy quote above, will sound subjective and impressionistic, though I hope it will inspire you to consider the novel in new ways.

I think Percy is right and that his description can lead us to something important. From my own experience of reading novels, it does seem that the very great ones possess a kind of “shape”—in some cases, sculpturally embodied, in some, musically, in some, mathematically--that is itself expressive of “meaning.” So that, were these novels not made of language anymore, but rather only of this “shape,” and you were blindfolded, and someone placed in your palm, say, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, then Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, then Nabokov's *Lolita*, then Percy's *Moviegoer*—and then Forster's *A Passage to India*—you would be able to tell them apart just by touching them. Again, that's a ridiculously vague and smoochy thing to say, but I still wonder if you identify with my description (and/or Percy's); and, most particularly, I wonder if the description can help us with *A Passage to India*.

Late in the novel, Aziz finds himself, yet again, in intimate conversation with a stranger--Ralph Moore, Mrs. Moore's son.

“I must go back now, good night,” said Aziz, and held out his hand, completely forgetting that they were not friends, and focusing his heart on something more distant than the caves, something beautiful. His hand was taken, and then he remembered how detestable he had been, and said gently, “Don't you think me unkind any more?”

“No.”

“How can you tell, you strange fellow?”

“Not difficult, the one thing I always know.”

“Can you always tell whether a stranger is your friend?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are an Oriental.” He unclasped as he spoke, with a little shudder. Those words-he had said them to Mrs. Moore in the mosque in the beginning of the cycle, from which, after so much suffering, he had got free. Never be friend with the English! Mosque, caves, mosque, caves. And here he was starting again.” (p. 249, Harvest Book edition.)

“Mosque, cave, mosque, cave”—it does seem that this shape, the “cycle” shape, is the one most “like” the lessons of the novel. Do you agree? If so, how is a “cycle” an adequate metaphor for, or embodiment of, the lessons of the novel?

Best wishes,
Emilie

