

HELEN'S FEMINISM AND HOMOSEXUALISM IN FORSTER'S *HOWARDS END*

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In Forster's Howards End we perceive that the author treats the characters either putting little emphasis on the sensual, sexual aspects of their relationships with other people, or that the characters are not concerned with sex, that they are asexual.

By bringing examples from the novel we will try to corroborate the statement above. More specifically, we will try to trace a parallel between feminism and homosexuality and show their close similarities and implications by studying Helen.

The reader is first introduced to Helen at the moment she falls in love with Paul. Later on she will understand better this episode in her life and see it as a consequence of the circumstances, for there were all the conditions for her to fall in love: "And all that she thought or did or breathed was a quiet preparation for Paul. Paul was inevitable. Charles was taken up with another girl, Mr. Wilcox was so old, Evie so young, Mrs. Wilcox so different. Round the absent brother she began to

throw the halo of Romance, to irradiate him with all the splendour of those happy days, to feel that in him she should draw nearest to the robust ideal....¹" Helen was a dreamer for a few days but woke up for reality on time. She got disillusioned with Paul and men in general. Her insight makes her conscious of woman's and man's role in the Wilcox family and in society in general. From this moment on she is disappointed with men and starts looking for something different for her. During the concert when she sees goblins and elephants on the stage we learn that she faces life in a very idealistic way, "They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world...Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse....²"

Helen has in Margaret a mother figure, and she is jealous when the latter decides to marry Mr. Wilcox. Helen has no father anymore and a brother that cannot be considered an example of manhood. In addition to this she had the mischievous affair with Paul and is put aside by Mr. Wilcox, who shares Margaret's attention now. She is given no good example concerning men.

Leonard Bast is the only manly figure to help her. It first happens when by accident Helen takes his umbrella home. The umbrella - besides being an evident phallic symbol - stands for an instrument that helps people to walk, as a stick. Helen was just in need of some care, for this occurs shortly after the episode with Paul. The second time Leonard helps her is when they make love. At that moment Helen is deeply upset, disappointed with Margaret and feeling lonely in a fight that turned to be only hers : against the powerful Wilcoxes and for the poor, weak, humble Basts. Here she needed someone to comfort her as well. Their making love happens the same way as it did when she falls in love with Paul, because there are all the conditions for this to happen. Both affairs happen by accident and cannot last since with Paul she got disillusioned and Leonard was already married. The two men of her life were not the right ones for her, which could lead us to think that she unconsciously chose the wrong men to avoid forming emotional links. Being impregnated by Leonard was a proper thing, for this would give her a baby without

having to share her life with a man, and he never comes to know about the baby.

Now Helen is definitely an outcast and goes to Germany. Later she tells Margaret that she is living with Monica, an Italian journalist, who Margaret imagines to be a "crude feminist of the South...." At this point comes to our mind Helen's other girl friends that have been mentioned, such as Frieda and Evie, but we don't know about Margaret having girl friends.

At the end the author puts Helen, Margaret and the baby together at Howards End and for Helen this is the most suitable situation; she doesn't need a man, it's complete with Margaret, who stands for a mother figure, and the baby. Margaret represents the masculine side of their relationship; she is the one who gets married, but Helen is the one who has a child.

In "Female Sexuality"³ Freud explains that a possible cause for homosexuality in women is that they, differently from men, have a pre-Oedipal phase which is characterized by a strong attachment to the mother, and that many remain in this phase and never change to men.

Since mother Schlegel is hardly mentioned, we will take Margaret as Helen's mother, the one who cares for her. Helen is strongly attached to the sister and she expresses this clearly: "I mean to love you more than ever...You and I have built up something real, because it is purely spiritual.... Unreality and mystery begin as soon as one touches the body...."⁴ This may be a criticism against Margaret's marriage, because Helen would like them to stay together and share this spiritual, ethereal love. Helen's problems towards sexual life are also implicit, she is incapable of normal sexual love, she dislikes men.

In this sense we find a diffused idea of feminism as well as homosexuality in this novel, for Helen is more attached to women than to men. It is known that among radical feminists many homosexuals are found, and that both, somehow, have something against men. In Helen's case we know about her disillusion with men and her strong attachment to women.

If we consider the situation created almost at the end of the novel, when both sisters and the baby are together at Howards End, through Helen's eyes we see them as a family, which

has its masculine and feminine parts, and a child that comes from another father, which could happen with a normal man-and-woman family. However if homosexual women prefer to live with women and don't need a man except to get pregnant, this doesn't happen with feminists (here I mean not the radical feminists, but those who fight for women rights and want to have a man beside them). This kind of woman look for suitable men to live with and don't dispense them; they see them as companions.

Anyway in Forster's time homosexuality was something dreadful to discuss and feminism was crawling; however, knowing Forster's homosexuality could we infer that he created Helen in order to use her as a means of catharsis? or as someone to propagate his ideas on the subject?

NOTES

¹Edward Morgan Forster, Howards End, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Middlesex: Penguin English Library, 1983), p. 38.

²Forster, p. 46.

³Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality," in Sexuality and Psychology of Love (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 194-211.

⁴Edward Morgan Forster, Howards End, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Middlesex Penguin English Library, 1983), p. 195.

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