

# EDWARD MORGAN FORSTER AND HIS ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

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## Abstract:

*Aspects of the Novel* is the publication of a series of lectures on the English Language novel delivered by E.M. Forster. These lectures presents the seven aspects, Forster believes, should include in the novel. Those seven aspects are story, people, plot, fantasy and prophecy, pattern and rhythm. This article is elaborating those seven aspects along with the explanation. It is expected that after reading Forster's lectures, people will get a better insight towards the form of a good novel.

## Key words:

E.M.Forster, *Aspects of the Novels*

## Introduction

Edward Morgan Forster (1 January 1879 – 7 June 1970), was an English novelist, short story writer, essayist and librettist. He is known best for his ironic and well-plotted novels examining class difference and hypocrisy in early 20th-century British society. Forster's humanistic impulse toward understanding and sympathy may be aptly summed up in the epigraph to his 1910 novel *Howards End*: "Only connect".

Forster was the only child of Edward Morgan Forster, architect, who died in 1880, and of Alice 'Lily' Whichelo (1855-1945). His boyhood was dominated by women, among them is his influential great aunt and benefactress Marianne Thornton. She left 8000-pound sterling for Forster. He has a happy childhood years (1883- 93)

when he spent the time at Rooksnest, Stevenage, a house he evokes in *Howards End*.<sup>1</sup>

With the money that was inherited from his parental great-aunt Marianne, he became a writer. Thus he spent most of his life writing many books such as novels, short stories, plays, film scripts, literary criticism, biography etc. One of his works which is going to be discussed in this paper is *Aspects of the Novel* which is as a literary criticism.

*Aspects of the Novel* is the publication of a series of lectures on the English language novel, delivered by E. M. Forster at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1927 after he wrote *A passage to India*. Forster dismisses the

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<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ E.M. Forster. Download on 1 December 2010 in <http://emforster.de/hypertext/template.php3?t=life>

method of examining the novel as a historical development, in preference to an image of all novelists throughout history writing simultaneously, side by side. He first establishes that a novel is a story that takes place over a period of time. He stresses the importance of character, maintaining that both "flat" and "round" characters may be included in the successful novel. He regards the necessity of plot, which creates the effect of suspense, as a problem by which character is frequently sacrificed in the service of providing an ending to the novel. Fantasy and prophecy, which provide a sense of the "universal," or spiritual, Forster regards as central aspects of the great novel.

Finally, he dismisses the value of "pattern," by which a narrative may be structured, as another aspect that frequently sacrifices the vitality of character. Drawing on the metaphor of music, Forster concludes that rhythm, which he defines as "repetition plus variation," allows for an aesthetically pleasing structure to emerge from the novel, while maintaining the integrity of character and the open-ended quality that gives novels a feeling of expansiveness.

This article is examining the seven aspects Edward believes universal to the novel: story, characters, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ Aspects of the Novel summary. Download on 1 December 2010 in <http://www.enotes.com/aspects-novel>.

### **The Life of E.M. Forster**

Edward Morgan Foster was born on 1 January 1879 in London and spent his childhood in Rooksnest with his mother, aunts and governesses. He often did travelling to Italy, Greece. On his return to Greece, he began to write for the *New Independent Review* which was launched in 1903.

In 1905 he completed *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, which was published the same year, and spent some months in Germany as tutor to the children of the Countess von Arnim. In 1906, now established with his mother in Weybridge, he became tutor to Syed Ross Masood, a striking and colonial Indian Muslim patriot, for whom Forster developed an intense affection. The *Longest Journey* appeared in 1907, *A Room with a View* in 1908, and *Howards End*, which established Forster as a writer of importance, in 1910. In 1911 he published a collection of short stories, mostly pastoral and whimsical in tone and subject-matter, *The Celestial Omnibus*.

In 1912-13 he visited India for some months, meeting Masood in Aligarh and traveling with him. In 1913 another significant visit to the home of E. Carpenter near Chesterfield resulted in his writing *Maurice*, a novel with a homosexual theme which he circulated privately; it was published posthumously in 1971. It did not as he had hoped open a new vein of creativity and the outbreak of war further impeded his career. He

worked for a while at the National Gallery then went to Alexandria in 1915 for the Red Cross; his *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* was published somewhat abortively in 1922 (almost the entire stock was burned) and reprinted in revised form in 1938. In Alexandria he met Cavafy whose works, on his return to England in 1919, he helped to introduce; an essay on *Cavafy* appears in *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923).

In 1921-22 he revisited India, working as personal secretary for the maharajah of the native state of Dewas Senior for several months. The completion of *A Passage to India* (1922-4) which he had begun before the war, was overshadowed by the death of his closest Egyptian friend Mohammed, but when the novel appeared in June 1924 it was highly acclaimed. Forster's fears that this would be his last novel proved correct, and the remainder of his life was devoted to a wide range of literary activities; over many years he took a firm stand against censorship, involving himself in the work of PEN and the NCCL, of which he became the first president, campaigning in 1928 against the suppression of R. Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and appearing in 1960 as a witness for the defence in the trial of the publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

In 1927 he delivered the Clark lectures at Cambridge printed the same year as *Aspects of the Novel*; his tone in these was in his own words 'informal, indeed talkative', and they contain the

celebrated comment, 'yes-oh dear yes-the novel tells a story.'

In the 1930s and 1940s Forster became a successful broadcaster on BBC Radio and a public figure associated with the British Humanist Association. He was awarded a Benson Medal in 1937. Forster developed a long-term loving relationship with Bob Buckingham, a married policeman (his wife's name was May), and included the couple in his circle, which also included the writer and arts editor of *The Listener*, J.R. Ackerley, the psychologist W.J.H. Sprott, and, for a time, the composer Benjamin Britten. Other writers with whom Forster associated included the poet Siegfried Sassoon and the Belfast-based novelist Forrest Reid.

Forster was elected an honorary fellow of King's College, Cambridge in January 1946, and lived for the most part in the college, doing relatively little. He declined a knighthood in 1949 and was made a Companion of Honour in 1953. In 1969 he was made a member of the Order of Merit. Forster died of a stroke in Coventry on 7 June 1970 at the age of 91, at the home of the Buckingham. Forster was a humanist, homosexual, lifelong bachelor.

### **Forster's Novels**

Forster had five novels published in his lifetime. Although *Maurice* appeared shortly after his death, it had been written nearly sixty years earlier. A

seventh novel, *Arctic Summer*, was never finished.

His first novel is *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905). It is the story of Lilia, a young English widow who falls in love with an Italian man, and of the efforts of her bourgeois relatives to get her back from Monteriano (based on San Gimignano). The mission of Philip Herriton to retrieve her from Italy has features in common with that of Lambert Strether in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, a work Forster discussed ironically and somewhat disapprovingly in his book *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), where *Angels Fear to Tread* was adapted into a film by Charles Sturridge in 1991.

Next, Forster published *The Longest Journey* (1907), an inverted Bildungsroman following the lame Rickie Elliott from Cambridge to a career as a struggling writer and then to a post as a schoolmaster, married to the unappetizing Agnes Pembroke. In a series of scenes on the hills of Wiltshire which introduce Rickie's wild half-brother Stephen Wonham, Forster attempts a kind of sublime related to those of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence.

Forster's third novel, *A Room with a View* (1908), is his lightest and most optimistic. It was started before any of his others, as early as 1901, and exists in earlier forms referred to as "Lucy". The book is the story of young Lucy Honeychurch's trip to Italy with her cousin, and the choice she must make

between the free-thinking George Emerson and the repressed aesthete Cecil Vyse. George's father Mr Emerson quotes thinkers who influenced Forster, including Samuel Butler. *A Room with a View* was filmed by Merchant-Ivory in 1985.

His other novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* can be seen collectively as Forster's Italian novels. Both include references to the famous Baedeker guidebooks and concern narrow-minded middle-class English tourists abroad. The books share many themes with short stories collected in *The Celestial Omnibus* and *The Eternal Moment*.

*Howards End* (1910) is an ambitious "condition-of-England" novel concerned with different groups within the Edwardian middle classes represented by the *Schlegels* (bohemian intellectuals), the *Wilcoxes* (thoughtless plutocrats) and the *Basts* (struggling lower-middle-class aspirants). It is frequently observed that characters in Forster's novels die suddenly. This is true of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Howards End* and, most particularly, *The Longest Journey*.

Forster achieved his greatest success with *A Passage to India* (1924). The novel takes as its subject the relationship between East and West, seen through the lens of India in the later days of the British Raj. Forster connects personal relationships with the politics of colonialism through the story

of the Englishwoman Adela Quested, the Indian Dr. Aziz, and the question of what did or did not happen between them in the Marabar Caves. Forster makes special mention of Ahmed Ali and his *Twilight in Delhi* in his Preface to its Everyman's Library Edition.

*Maurice* (1971) was published posthumously. It is a homosexual love story which also returns to matters familiar from Forster's first three novels, such as the suburbs of London in the English home counties, the experience of attending Cambridge, and the wild landscape of Wiltshire. The novel was controversial, given that Forster's sexuality had not been previously known or widely acknowledged. Today's critics continue to argue over the extent to which Forster's sexuality, even his personal activities influenced his writing.

### Key Themes of Forster's Novels

Five novels were written by Forster during his life. They have special characteristics which dominated all his novels; humanist, irreconcilability of class difference, sexuality and symbolism.<sup>3</sup>

The first key theme of Forster's work is humanist. His humanist attitude is expressed in the non-fictional essay *What I Believe*. His views as a humanist are at the heart of his work,

which often depicts the pursuit of personal connections in spite of the restrictions of contemporary society. Edward was President of the Cambridge Humanists from 1959 until his death and a member of the Advisory Council of the British Humanist Association from 1963 until his death.

The next second key theme of Forster's is the irreconcilability. Forster's two best-known works, *A Passage to India* and *Howards End*, explore the irreconcilability of class differences. *A Room with a View* also shows how questions of propriety and class can make connection difficult. The novel is his most widely read and accessible work, remaining popular long after its original publication. His posthumous novel *Maurice* explores the possibility of class reconciliation as one facet of a homosexual relationship.

Sexuality is another key theme in Forster's works, and it has been argued that a general shift from heterosexual love to homosexual love can be detected over the course of his writing career. The foreword to *Maurice* describes his struggle with his own homosexuality, while similar issues are explored in several volumes of homosexually charged short stories. Forster's explicitly homosexual writings, the novel *Maurice* and the short-story collection *The Life to Come*, were published shortly after his death.

Forster is noted for his use of symbolism as a technique in his novels, and he has been criticised (as

<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ E.M.Forster. Download on 6 december 2010 in <http://www.kirjastro.sci.fi/forster.htm>.

by his friend Roger Fry) for his attachment to mysticism. One example of his symbolism is the *wych elm tree* in *Howards End*; the characters of Mrs Wilcox in that novel and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* have a mystical link with the past and a striking ability to connect with people from beyond their own circles.

### **Forster's Aspects of the Novel**

Aspects of the Novel is the publication of a series of lectures on the English language novel, delivered by E. M. Forster at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1927. Using examples of classic works by many of the world's greatest writers, he discusses seven aspects he believes universal to the novel: story, characters, plot, fantasy and prophecy, pattern and rhythm.<sup>4</sup>

### **Story**

Forster begins with the statement that the novel tells a story. A story must be build around the suspense-the question of "what happens next?" Thus, a story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence — it simply tells us what happened and in what order. It is the time sequence, which turns a random collection of episodes into a story. It is the backbone of the novel. However, chronological sequence is a very

primitive feature and it can have only one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. The only skill of a storyteller is their ability to use the weapon of suspense, making the audience eager to discover the next event in the sequence. A novel is said and considered successful audience is brought to the point of high suspense (to the desperation of wanting to know what happens next) and fails when it does not create that suspense — when an audience does not want to know, and does not care.

This emphasis on chronological sequence is a difference from real life. Our real lives also unfold through time but have the added feature that some experiences have greater value and meaning than others. Value has no role in a story, which is concerned with the life in time rather than the life by values. In addition, because human lives measured by time consist of nothing more than the business of getting old, a story cannot sincerely lead to any conclusion but the grave.

The basis of a novel is a story — the narration of events in the order they happened — but storytelling alone can never produce a great novel. The simple chronological narrative of **War and Peace** only manages to achieve some kind of greatness because it has extended over space as well as time, and the sense of space until it terrifies us is exhilarating, and leaves behind it an effect like music. After one has read **War and Peace** for a bit, great chords

<sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_Aspects of the Novel summary. Download on 1 December 2010 in <http://www.enotes.com/aspects-novel>.

begin to sound, and we cannot exactly say what struck them. They come from the immense area of Russia, over which episodes and characters have been scattered, from the sum-total of bridges and frozen rivers, forests, roads, gardens, fields, which accumulate grandeur and sonority after we have passed them.

### **People**

In two chapters entitled "People," Forster discusses characterization in the novel. A novelist can only begin to explore the value of human experiences by developing the characters of the story. He describes five "main facts of human life," which includes birth, food, sleep, love and death and then compares these five activities as experienced by real people (*homo sapiens*) to these activities as enacted by characters in novels (*homo fictus*).

Characters' lives are different from real lives, and common activities such as sleeping and eating occupy little space in novels, whereas love is greatly over-represented. 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. In daily life, we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists. People in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. We cannot understand each

other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. However, in the novel we can know people perfectly.

It is this completeness that allows characters to take on the air of being real, and gives us a definition as to when a character in a book is real: it is real when the novelist knows everything about it. He may not tell us all he knows, but he will give us the feeling that though the character has not been explained, it is explicable.

Forster distinguishes between flat characters and round characters. The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as 'I will never desert Mr Micawber.' There is Mrs Micawber — she says she won't desert Mr Micawber; she doesn't, and there she is. These characters are easily recognised when first introduced and easily remembered afterwards, and their memorability appeals to our yearning for permanence. They are best when they are comic. A serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore. Flat characters do not grow (Robert and Henry, 2003: 140). the same because they lack knowledge or insight, or because they are stupid or insensitive. They end where they begin and thus they are static, not dynamic. Usually flat characters are minor but not all minor characters are necessarily flat.

Sometimes flat characters are prominent in certain type of literature

such as detective stories, police where the focus is less on character than on performance. Such characters might be lively and engaging though they do not develop or change. They must be strong, clever enough to perform recurring task such as solving a crime, overcoming a villain. The term stock character refers to characters in these repeating situations. To the degree that stock characters have many common traits, they representative of their class or group. Some regular stock characters are the sassy younger sister or brother, the greedy politician, the submissive or nagging wife. Stock character stays flat as long as they do more than perform their roles and exhibit conventional and unindividual traits.

Dickens wrote flat characters excellently that nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own. It is a conjuring trick. Part of the genius of Dickens is that he does use types and caricatures, people whom we recognize the instant they re-enter, and yet achieves effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow.

A round character by contrast has further dimensions to their personality, which are revealed as events demand them. A flat character never surprises us with their behaviour, but a round character may well surprise

us with these unsuspected aspects of their nature; and the test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. Round characters are dynamics.<sup>5</sup> That is they recognize, change with, or adjust to circumstances. Such change may be shown in (1) an action or actions, (2) the realization of new strength, (3) the acceptance of new condition and the need for making changes. Even if events never require these characters to extend themselves, they nevertheless have the capacity. All the Jane Austen characters are ready for an extended life, for a life which the scheme of her books seldom requires them to lead, and that is why they lead their actual lives so satisfactorily.

Looking back to a fictional technique common in eighteenth and nineteenth century novels — that of telling different sections of the story through different characters — Forster believes the effect of changing viewpoint is less important than the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says and having a proper mixture of characters.

### **Plot**

A story has been defined as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on

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<sup>5</sup> Roberts, Edgar V and Henry E. Jacobs. 2003. *Literature: an Introduction to Reading and Writing*. USA: Pearson Education Inc.



causality. When recounted by itself, it bears about the same relationship to a story that a map does to a journey. Just a map may be drawn on a finer or grosser scale, so may a plot be recounted with lesser or greater details. It may include what a character says or thinks, as well as what he does, but it leaves out description and analysis that concentrates ordinarily on major happenings. For example; 'The king died and then the queen died,' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief,' is a plot. The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say 'and then?' If it is in a plot, we ask 'why?' In this case the readers will analyze deeply the events causing the death of the queen.

Talking about a plot Forster begins by suggesting Aristotle, who maintained that all human happiness and mystery takes the form of actions, is wrong. Forster continued that Aristotle knew nothing about novels and based his theory on the nature and function of drama, in which everything unseen, unknown and unknowable must be understood from action. The novelist has access to the unknowable, and can therefore devote time and energy to its unexpressed, inner existence, communicating it without resource to action.

A plot demands intelligence and memory on the part of the reader, to remember incidents and create

connecting threads between them. A reader who wants to know will try to find new fact with his eyes but an intelligent reader will find it with his smart ways. First in a separate way and by relating it with some related facts that he has read before from the previous pages. This allows the novelist to delay explanations and introduce human mystery to the narrative. Mystery is essential to a plot, and cannot be appreciated without intelligence; part of the mind must be left behind, brooding, while the other part goes marching on. The second aspect of needed in understanding plot is the memory. The memory and intelligence are related deeply because we cannot comprehend something without our memory. For example, if we cannot memorize the existence of the king who was in the previous pages, we cannot understand why he passed away.

In Novels, a novelist can talk about his characters and can also express his ideas or thought through his characters that he creates.

This relationship between cause and effect also connects the characters with the plot. Incident springs out of character, and having occurred it alters that character. People and events are closely connected. The balance between them is sometimes difficult to achieve though, because characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause surprise. Sometimes a plot triumphs too completely. The characters have to suspend their natures at every turn, or else are so

swept away by the course of Fate that our sense of their reality is weakened. Perrine adds that suspense is the quality in a story that makes readers ask 'what's going to happen next?' or 'How will this turn out?' and impels them to read on to find the answers to these questions. Suspense is greatest when the readers' curiosity is combined with anxiety about the fate of some sympathetic character.

### **Fantasy and Prophecy**

In a chapter on fantasy, Forster asserts that two important aspects of the novel are fantasy and prophecy, both of which include an element of mythology. Using the novel *Tristram Shandy*, by Sterne, as an example, Forster claims even novels that do not include literal elements of the supernatural may include an implication that supernatural forces are at work. He lists some of the common devices of fantasy used by novelists, "such as the introduction of a god, ghost, angel, or monkey, monster, midget, witch into ordinary life." He adds to this list "the introduction of ordinary men into no-man's land, the future, the past, the interior of the earth, the fourth dimension; or divings into and diviings of personality."<sup>6</sup>

He further says that fantasy produces a special effect. Fantasy implies the supernatural, but it

may do this by no more than simply hinting through a magical quality in events. The stuff of daily life will be tugged and strained in various directions; the earth will be given little tilts mischievous or pensive. Forster includes parodies and adaptations of earlier works as forms of fantasy, which allow another writer's imagination to take flight. Parody or adaptation have enormous advantages to certain novelists, particularly to those who may have a great deal to say and abundant literary genius, but who do not see the world in terms of individual men and women — who do not, in other words, take easily to creating characters. He points to *Joseph Andrews*, by Henry Fielding, which began as a parody of *Pamela*, by Richardson. He goes on to the example of *Ulysses*, by James Joyce, which is an adaptation from the ancient text the *Odyssey*, based on Greek myth.

Forster describes the aspect of prophecy in a novel as "a tone of voice" of the author, a "song" by which "his theme is the universe," although his subject matter may be anything but universal. He notes that the aspect of prophecy demands of the reader both "humility" and "the suspension of a sense of humor. Furthermore, Prophecy is an accent in the novelist's voice. . The characters and events still have a specific meaning within the story, but they also have greater resonances. In Dostoyevsky the characters and situations always stand

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<sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ Aspects of the Novel.  
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for more than themselves; infinity attends them.

This is different from symbolism, in which characters and events represent concrete meanings. Rather prophecy is about mysterious, imprecise meanings, which connect us with the history of humankind. It is not a veil, it is not an allegory. It is the ordinary world of fiction, but it reaches back. Melville — after the initial roughness of his realism — reaches straight back into the universal, to a blackness and sadness so transcending our own that they are undistinguishable from glory.

### **Pattern and Rhythm**

In his book; *Aspects of the novel*, Forster has dealt with two important aspects namely pattern and rhythm.<sup>7</sup> He defines the term pattern is as a literary term, a model, design, plan, or precedent – with the implication of being worthy of imitation. Forster in his *Aspects of the novel* has employed the term pattern only in the specific sense of design or geometrical shape of plot of a novel. As he said that a novel has a pattern when it has a geometric shape, such as the hour-glass shape of one character's social fall crossing over with another's social climb, or the circular shape of a character moving from one new acquaintance to the next until they finally return to their starting

point. Pattern is an aesthetic aspect of the novel, and though it may be nourished by anything in the novel — any character, scene, word — it draws most of its nourishment from the plot. Whereas the story appeals to our curiosity and the plot to our intelligence, the pattern appeals to our aesthetic sense, it causes us to see the book as a whole.

However, forcing the characters to fit an external pattern, instead of allowing the plot to grow organically, causes a novel to lose the immense richness of material which life provides. To most readers of fiction the sensation from a pattern is not intense enough to justify the sacrifices that made it, and their verdict is 'Beautifully done, but not worth doing.'

Rhythm on the other hand is like a musical motif which reappears with slight variations and helps to unify the novel. Such a motif has a life of its own, unconnected with the lives of its auditors. It is almost an actor, but not quite, and that 'not quite' means that its power has gone towards stitching [the] book together from the inside.

The appearance of a motif is not an artificial pattern, and there are times when it means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me the function of rhythm in fiction; not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope. I doubt that it can be achieved by the writers who plan their books beforehand,

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<sup>7</sup>Cuddon, J.A. *Pattern and Rhythm*. Download on 6 December 2010 in <http://books.google.co.id/books?id=VIE0rb35->

it has to depend on a local impulse when the right interval is reached. But the effect can be exquisite, it can be obtained without mutilating the characters, and it lessens our need of an external form.<sup>8</sup>

### Closing

Forster's speech delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge (1927) about the seven aspects of the novel; story, character, plot, fantasy and prophecy, pattern and rhythm, which were published as *Aspects of the novel*, give us a better insight to the form a good novel. Furthermore, this Forster's views today form an important part of literary analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Aspects of the Novel*. Download on 5 December 2010 in <http://www.storyinsight.com/techniques/media/forster.html>