

Outside the drawing room



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Few subjects seem better suited for traditional Victorian drawing room conversation than that of social class. Written in 1910, E. M. Forster's *Howards End* has just enough Victorian influence to concern itself with the struggles of social class, while simultaneously being just Edwardian enough for Forster to peer out of the drawing room into England's future. Throughout the novel, Forster contrasts the wealthy Schlegel and Wilcox families with the economically struggling Basts. Forster gradually intertwines the three families, blurring social lines and using their ultimate confluence to represent the hope of a kind of classless Utopia in England's future.

The Schlegel and Wilcox families both represent the privileged upper class, with their main contrast being in ideology. While the Schlegels adhere to liberal, emotionally driven ideas based on art and literature, the Wilcoxes represent a more traditional, materialistic background. Margaret summarizes these ideological differences, remarking of the Wilcoxes, "Personal relations, that we think supreme, are not supreme there. There love means marriage settlements, death, death duties" (18). From the beginning, the Wilcox family is obviously associated with money, with Helen herself admitting to instinctively "associat[ing] them with expensive hotels" (1). Although the Schlegels also come from a privileged background, their observations of the Wilcoxes cause them to fear the threat wealth poses to their idealism. Helen confesses to fearing that behind their money, "the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness" (17). Margaret, too, fears the power of her own wealth, remarking, "You and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands. Last night... I began to think

that the very soul of the world is economic, and that the lowest abyss is not the absence of love, but the absence of coin" (42). Here, Margaret laments society's dependence on wealth, echoing the earlier fear that "this outer life, though obviously horrid, often seems the real one," as there may truly be nothing behind their wealth but "panic and emptiness" (18). In uniting the Schlegels and Wilcoxes through the marriage of Margaret and Henry, Forster attempts to dispel this fear of panic and emptiness, suggesting that as England continues to change, the lines between materialism and idealism will blur, resulting in a society in which "personal relations" carry as much weight as "telegrams and anger" (18).

Forster's ultimate confluence of social classes, however, is not possible without its third party, Leonard Bast. Unlike the wealthy Schlegel and Wilcox families, Leonard stands "at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it" (31). While the Schlegels fear that wealth may overpower their ideals of culture and "personal relations," Leonard believes that he can only attain wealth through culture, feeling that he is "obliged to assert gentility, lest he slip into the abyss" (32). However, although Leonard has clear ambitions, his social status continuously frustrates his quest for culture, causing him to question "how it was possible to catch up with leisured women who had been reading steadily from childhood" (27).

Throughout the novel, Leonard's interactions with the wealthier families repeatedly end in disaster, ultimately leading to Leonard's death. In presenting Leonard as a tragic figure who never achieves his cultural aspirations, Forster concedes that, during Leonard's lifetime, it is in fact not possible for people of lower social classes to "catch up" with the wealthy.

However, as with the Schlegels and Wilcoxes, Forster does not stop at England's present, but rather paints a portrait of his hope for England's future. Although Leonard Bast himself is incapable of social mobility, his ambitions come to a kind of secondhand fruition through his son with Helen. Leonard Bast's son is born into the novel's utopian confluence of Schlegelian idealism and Wilcoxian wealth, representing a new generation of Englishmen. The baby functions as a symbol of Forster's quest for social harmony, solidified by the promise that the privileged baby and the young servant boy, Tom, "are going to be lifelong friends" (240). Although Leonard Bast himself is a tragic representation of England's present social structure, his son's presence within the ultimate union of the Schlegels and Wilcoxes illustrates Forster's hope for a socially harmonious English future.

In literature, social class is an almost comically Victorian subject, immediately calling to mind images of Dickensian orphans and Brontësque governesses. While the novel at many times conjures an image of Forster engrossed in drawing room conversation with George Eliot and Anthony Trollope, its ending proves that Forster belongs to a different generation of writers. In *Howards End*, Forster puts down his tea just long enough to glance out of the drawing room into England's future.