Conflicting impulses: desire and convention in e. m. forster’s a room with a view...

The conflict between a conventional lifestyle and the desire to follow individual passion is a struggle that pervades both E. M. Forster's A Room with a View and Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day. Despite differing in subject matter and style, both novels depict social convention as repressive and question whether this makes for a happy and fulfilling existence. In A Room with a View, Forster strongly contrasts imagery as a means of visually representing of this divide. Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day maintains a similar theme. However, presenting a contrast to Forster's omniscient narration, Ishiguro structures his novel in the first person, forming an elegant yet restrained memoir of his protagonist's career as Butler at Darlington Hall. By subtly bedding Stevens' unspoken desires and regrets into his predominantly formal language, Ishiguro creates a metaphor for the dangers of overly conforming to social convention as by suppressing his emotions, Stevens begins to lose sight of his true self.

In A Room with a View, Forster's use of character highlights the divide between social convention and human desire. His depiction of Lucy Honeychurch's cousin and chaperone Miss Bartlett, embodies the epitome of Edwardian propriety. Despite the decline of Victorian moral values in the early Twentieth Century, social protocol retained much of the previous era's conventions. Forster presents ' unselfish' ' unattractive' Miss Bartlett as clinging to this social ' delicacy' with dogged fixation. In Chapter Four, he creates a strong juxtaposition by placing her amongst the sensuous statues of Florence's Piazza Signora. This unlikely combination is highly comic as it highlights Miss Bartlett's conventional distaste for sexual desire. This is

furthered by her reaction to Lucy’s attempt to purchase a photograph of Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus:

‘ Venus, being a pity, spoiled the picture, otherwise so charming and Miss Bartlett had persuaded Lucy to do without it.’

By employing assonance in his description of ‘ Venus’ as a ‘ pity,’ Forster creates a condescending tone. Furthermore, by juxtaposing an ancient symbol of desire with the whimsical ‘ charming,’ he suggests a conventional tendency to objectify sexuality as insignificant as opposed to a fundamental desire, consequently exposing social ideals as ridiculous. Thus, in advising Lucy to ‘…do without it,’ Forster presents Miss Bartlett as promoting the dictates of society as opposed to the expression of human emotion.

Forster presents Edwardian society as absurdly unappreciative of basic desire. However, he also illustrates the appeal of a conventional lifestyle as it promises a composed and comfortable life. Just as Miss Bartlett signifies safety as Lucy’s chaperone, Forster describes Lucy’s fiancé Cecil as possessing similar qualities:

‘ He was Medieval. Like a Gothic statue. Tall and refined, with shoulders that seemed braced square by an effort of will…A Gothic statue implies celibacy just as a Greek statue implies fruition.’

By describing his shoulders as ‘ braced’ and physique as ‘ tall,’ Forster imbues stereotypical imagery of masculinity. Furthermore, his use of caesura moulds the language into short, clipped sentences, commanding a tone of respect. However, by concluding his description with the mention of ‘

celibacy,' Forster dispels Cecil's appearance of masculinity, as by hinting at his lack of sexual desire, he denotes his impotence as a man. Forster extends this by referencing the motif of the classical world, which runs through the novel. While a ' Greek statue implies fruition,' Cecil resembles a Medieval saint. Ironically, this draws a parallel with Miss Bartlett as Forster suggests they share a conventional fear of sexual desire.

Ishiguro presents a similar situation in The Remains of the Day. Like Cecil, Ishiguro's protagonist Stevens is described as physically imposing and his sharp, clipped attitude gains respect from the staff at Darlington Hall. However, his description of the attraction between him and the housekeeper Miss Kenton suggests that like Forster's conventional characters, he fears his own sexuality:

'...It was my impression that Miss Kenton's manner also underwent a sudden change; there was a strange seriousness in her expression, and it struck me that she seemed almost frightened.'

By employing sibilance in his description of Miss Kenton's ' strange seriousness,' Ishiguro softens the tone, creating a stark contrast to Stevens' official language, used throughout the majority of the novel. When this is combined with his use of assonance, a new tone is introduced that borders on sensuality. However, by choosing the adjective ' strange,' Ishiguro nullifies any suggestion of sexual desire, creating a parallel with Forster's Cecil as he presents his characters as estranged from their bodily instinct. This creates a disturbing image as, despite being fully developed adults, both characters are childishly mystified by their own desire and

consequently, it is frightening. Thus, Ishiguro creates a sense of great sadness as he suggests that in conforming so rigidly to social convention, his characters have broken away from their emotions, resulting in a disconnected sense of self.

Ishiguro presents sexual desire as unsettling. However, he also highlights the dangers of leading a life devoid of passion. Throughout the novel, pathetic fallacy is used to parallel his characters' emotional states. In the final chapter, Stevens describes a meeting with Miss Kenton. Years have passed and they are both approaching old age. Ishiguro creates a dreary image as they wait for the bus that will separate them, perhaps for a long time:

' The rain was still falling steadily as we got out of the car and hurried towards the shelter.'

By employing cacophony in ' still falling steadily,' Ishiguro creates a resentful tone. When this is combined with the imagery of driving rain, he creates a metaphor for the consequence of the deprivation of his character's desire. Furthermore, by drawing on the common association between water and emotion, Ishiguro signifies an emotional release as both characters break away from conventional formalities and express their regrets. However, the tension created by the approaching bus constrains their time together and suggests a lack of control. This fulfils Sam Jordison's view of Stevens as ' loyal to a fault' as Ishiguro demonstrates how by conforming so rigorously to convention, both characters are never truly in command of their lives and desires.

Forster continues this theme in A Room with a View. Just as Ishiguro employs imagery of rain as a metaphor for convention, Forster projects a negative view of Edwardian society by associating its conventions with darkness. When Lucy turns away from George due to her fear of social disapproval, the Arno is ‘ almost black in the advancing night’ This foreshadows the ‘ the darkness’ that ‘ receive[s]’ her after she has suppressed her true desire in favor of social convention by rejecting George’s love later in the novel. In the novel’s introduction, Professor Malcolm Bradbury describes how as a homosexual man in the early Twentieth Century, Forster ‘…spent his youth and young adulthood, as Lucy Honeychurch nearly did, repressing his sexual desires to adhere to the expectations of society.’ Understanding Forster’s own experience of social repression sheds light on his negative attitude towards convention as, like Ishiguro’s protagonist Stevens, Forster was unable to express his true desires.

Both novels present the damaging effects of social convention. However, In A Room with a View, Forster also illustrates the irrepressible nature of human desire. In Chapter Twelve, he structures a highly comical scenario as Cecil, Lucy and her mother come across Freddy, George and the local vicar Mr. Beebe bathing naked in the woods. Unlike Cecil, Forster portrays George Emmerson as an embodiment sexual desire. This is furthered by his description of his ‘ Michelangeloesque’ physique as it links him directly with the classical world and thus with sensuality:

‘ Bare footed, bare-chested, radiant and personable against the shadowy woods, he called: ‘ Hullo Miss Honeychurch! Hullo!’

By imbuing imagery of light with the adjective ‘ radiant,’ Forster forms a binary opposite to the ‘ black’ of society. Not only does this suggest the positive outcome of not conforming to conventional ideals, it also evokes religious imagery, drawing on his belief in ‘ the holiness of direct desire.’ Furthermore, by likening George to the symbol of the Noble Savage with his bare feet and chest, Forster creates a metaphor for the strength of desire, suggesting that, despite the restrictions of society, passion is irrepressible, as it is an integral part of human nature. This view also transpires for The Remains of the Day. Despite the novels’ overriding theme of regret, Ishiguro’s description of the lights of Weymouth pier at the end of the novel creates a symbol for hope:

‘ The pier lights have just been switched on and behind me a crowd of people have just given a loud cheer to greet this event.’

The imagery of light dispelling the darkness of evening creates a parallel to Forster’s description of George as ‘ radiant’ as it suggests a purging of restricting conventions in favor of human emotion. Thus, by contrasting the crushing effect of social propriety with the ‘ light’ of true desire, both Forster and Ishiguro show the wisdom of pursuing a natural and human way of life.