

Howards end and on
beauty:
understanding smith's
parallels



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Even without reading the acknowledgments in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, it is extremely apparent that she derives her inspiration from E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. From the first line, the reader is able to start drawing parallels between the two novels. Surprisingly, Smith did not borrow her title from Forster's novel. Instead, it comes from Elaine Scarry's essay, *On Beauty and Being Just*, which begins with the claim that "Beauty brings copies of itself into being" (Scarry 3). With this, Smith is nodding to the beauty of Forster's novel by beautifully imitating it in a modern-day American version. While she takes a modern approach to Forster's condition-of-England novel, she maintains the central characters and conflicts that pervade the classic novel. Smith's novel, like Forster's classic, concentrates on the conflicts between two families from opposite ends of the ethical and political spectrum. These clashes present the reader with significant insight into the issues of the time. Just as Forster addresses issues of class and feminism in his novel, Smith tackles issues such as race, opportunity and intellect. Through her use of similar characters, plot points and reactions to beauty, Smith revamps the classic novel originally written by Forster.

Smith constructed main characters that are easily recognizable as modern, American versions of Forster's English characters. Both novels center on the thoughts of the main heroine. Smith's leading lady, Kiki Belsey, is obviously a reconstruction of the intellectual, liberal Margaret Schlegel. While the similarities between the two are startling, Smith created Kiki as a stronger female figure than Margaret. Although Margaret was extremely progressive and liberal for her place and time in history, she compromises some of her core beliefs and values in order to appease her husband. Kiki, on the other

hand, refuses to make concessions on her ideas on marriage and love, which ultimately leads to her separation from her husband. Smith indicates that this refusal is the mark of a true strong, independent woman. While the majority of the Smith's characters are transpositions of Forster's, she believes that some players were so complex that she felt it necessary to divide them into multiple people. Furthermore, it is obvious that Smith is less forgiving of her morally corrupt characters than Forster. While Henry Wilcox is hardly a likeable character, the two subsets of him are much more devious. Collectively, the two embody the infidelity and arrogance present in Henry's behavior. Separately, each one adopts different aspects of Henry's flawed nature. Monty Kipps represents the superiority and conservative aspects of Wilcox's personality. His traditionalist views on class structure and women's rights are reflected in Kipps's ideas on race and affirmative action. Howard Belsey, on the other hand, represents the ignorance that makes Henry such an unlikeable character. Furthermore, Carl Thomas is a beautiful, hip hop rapper that represents the lower class, just like Leonard Bast. Both men are aspiring and reaching for culture and higher class, which ultimately leads to their loss of identity during the process.

Along with characters, Smith also heavily borrowed from Forster's plot in *Howards End*. Although some of Smith's scenes are startlingly similar to Forster's, she tends to put a modern spin on Forster's outdated tale. There are obvious transformations, such as Helen's letters evolving into Jerome's emails. Both novels open with similar lines introducing these forms of communication. Smith opens with, "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father" (3) while Forster states "One may as well begin with

Helen's letters to her sister" (2). Even though these two lines seem incredibly similar, Smith goes on to further adjust Forster's plot to fit a modern American family. While class structure was a huge part of English life during the early twentieth-century, it is not an issue that is as well defined in the United States during the 1990s when *On Beauty* is set. Instead, Smith transforms class to an issue of race and educational opportunity. These issues are not only much more realistic for an interracial family living in the Northeast but are also more relatable to her modern audience. Furthermore, perhaps the most ironic aspect of Smith's novel is how she ended her novel. *Howards End* ended with Margaret finally obtaining her possession, the house *Howards End*, which answers many issues presented throughout the novel. By finally obtaining her pastoral inheritance, Margaret discovers the primary basis of her identity and answers the question of who will inherit England. Likewise, Smith ended her novel with a literal translation of *Howard's end*. When Kiki leaves Howard, he discovers that his identity begins and ends with his wife. Like Margaret, he also inherits a house, along with the children and all the responsibilities they entail. Smith subtly employs Zora's mouth to speak on the idea of placing such importance on a pastoral setting. Zora warns against "falling into pastoral fallacy" that is simply "a depoliticized reification" (218). She believes that this idealization of landscapes is the opposite of what intellectuals should believe. Even though Smith ended her story with this ironic and cynical approach, both novels leave the ending open to a hopefulness for the future.

Smith, like Forster, utilizes beauty and her characters' reactions in order to comment on their distinct personalities. In Forster's novel, Beethoven's Fifth

Symphony exposes each character's inner thoughts about beauty and life. While Margaret attentively listens to the music, Helen pictures " a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end" (Forster 46). Likewise, Smith uses classical music to expose the true nature of her characters. Howard, who is known for his inability to truly value beautiful art, simply sleeps through the masterpiece. Zora attempts to analyze the music by listening to a commentary simultaneously, which reflects her habit of "[living] through footnotes" (Smith 70). Jerome, on the other hand, is emotionally moved by the music. Considering his sensitive nature and deep connection to Christianity, it is understandable that he would be the most moved by the piece. Like Helen, Kiki imagines inspired illustrations to accompany the music, such as apes and mermaids. The fact that she is not an intellectual allows her to see past the academia that surrounds Mozart's work. This open mind allows her to appreciate the music for what it truly is rather than dissect it, like her daughter, or completely ignore it, like her husband. Music is not the only way that Smith reveals the complexity of her characters. Paintings are also a major focus of Smith's novel. Howard, an art history professor, cannot acknowledge the beauty of anything in life, which Jerome diagnoses as " a denial of joy" (Smith 236). Carlene's Haitian painting inspires many different reactions from Smith's characters. Each character loved the painting for different reasons; Monty for monetary motives and Levi for political implications. Other than Carlene, Kiki is the only one who actually enjoys the painting for its emotional and aesthetic effect. Both Forster and Smith realize the importance and magic of beauty. The endings of both novels result in a beautiful possession, either the house or the painting, which bestows a sort of magic or understanding on the main

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character. In Forster's work, Margaret gains Howards End just as she is forced to decide how to deal with Helen and her fatherless child. When faced with issues of feminism and morality, she takes inspiration from Howards End to confront the challenges and support her family. Likewise, Kiki discovers the painting in the exact moment that she is faced with her husband's devious infidelity. Like Helen, Kiki is challenged with this problem, but is able to overcome jealousy in favor of reconciliation. This charming notion, that beauty conquers all, is prevalent throughout both literary works.

Smith's parallel use of characters, plot and reactions not only renovates Forster's classic novel, but also places a significant importance on the magic of beauty. Considering mimicry is the highest form of flattery, it is apparent that Smith holds Forster in high regard. Beauty, according to author Catherine Lanone, is "to deem something beautiful means to fetishize it, to dehistoricize and depoliticize both art and perception". Howard definitely has a problem with accepting this idea of beauty which relates to his inability to simply "like the tomato". However, Margaret has no issue fetishizing the beauty of Howards End, just as Kiki can recognize and depoliticize the beauty of Carlene's painting. Smith expertly weaves a modern tale out of a British classic. When writing an essay on Forster, Smith comments, "There is no bigger crime in the English comic novel than thinking you are right". She manages to prove her point in her re-creation of Forster's novel. Howard, who never admits his wrongdoing, pays the ultimate price for his vanity. He loses his wife, potentially his job, as well as his self-respect. All in all, it is obvious that Smith's high esteem for Forster inspired her to write a stunning

novel that skillfully addresses the issues that plague modern interracial families in a beautiful, artful manner.

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