

Howards end – the social question essay



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E. M Forster - Howards End Howards End expresses a powerful critique on the conception of social class and social awareness in the early Edwardian Era. After the Victorian Era, values concerning class-awareness were altering. The story, set in the first decade of the 20th century, depicts this transformation and portrays two counter movements within the upper-middle class. The Wilcoxes and the Schlegels represent these opposite points of view in class-awareness. The Wilcoxes model for the capitalist bourgeoisie, the Schlegels represent the liberal intelligentsia.

At the time, these alternative ideologies conflicted, causing a division within the upper-middle class. Howards End depicts the socio-political, cultural and ideological differences between these parties, related to their class-awareness. In so doing Forster investigates which ideology ought to dominate. As David Lodge puts it: The issue it addresses (...) is whether culture (...) is an attainable ideal. If culture at the personal level depends ultimately on the possession of money (and Forster insists that it does), can it be shared equally in society?

And what stance should the advocates of culture adopt towards those who make money, and towards those who have little or none? However, Forster's answer is not unilateral. He does not advocate the predominance of one ideology, but puts forward an alternative society where these ideologies do not collide, but harmonize. I will begin this paper with a delineation of the two ideologies represented in the novel, to indicate their differences. Then I'll move on to Forster's conclusion: the harmony of these two, without the prevalence of one ideology.) The Wilcoxes The Wilcoxes represent the capitalist bourgeoisie. A family that has founded its fortune in the colonies is

deeply marked by the traditional values of Victorianism. They propagate traditional ideas about sexuality, morality, art, and class-awareness. As Helen outlines their values: Equality was nonsense, Votes for Women nonsense, Socialism nonsense, Art and Literature, except when conducive to strengthening the character, nonsense. (p. 20) The Wilcoxes tend a lot of importance to hierarchy, both within the family as in society.

The relation between Mr Wilcox and his son can exemplify the former: Charles had been kind in understanding the funeral arrangements and in telling him to eat his breakfast, but the boy as he grew up was a little dictatorial, and assumed the post of chairman too readily. (p. 86) Concerning the hierarchy in society, it is clear that the Wilcoxes have no eye or empathy for the lower classes. They look down upon their servants and ‘bully porters, etc.’ (p. 3). Aunt Juley also reflects this attitude, as well as many of their values.

For example, she refers to servants with the degrading term ‘the lower orders’: ‘She sat quivering while a member of the lower orders deposited a metal funnel (...)’ (p. 17). Traditional class-awareness was highly esteemed in Victorianism. Even Mr Bast, a member of the lower middle-class, accepts the constraint of social classes, as he declares: If rich people fail at one profession, they can try another. Not I. (...) It’s the whole world pulling. There always will be rich and poor. (p. 94) Consequently, Mr Bast is entirely neglected by Mr Wilcox, who doesn’t even remember their acquaintance at Wickham Place. Later he will describe the Basts as following: ‘They aren’t our sort, and one must face the fact.’ (p. 123). The Wilcoxes are capitalists; they see class-division as natural, and something one mustn’t challenge.

Another significant aspect is their attitude towards women. The Wilcoxes have a patriarchal view on society. Consequently they often tend to look down on women or reveal prejudices about the female race. Margaret was to come up at once – the words were underlined, as is necessary when dealing with women. ' (p. 134) Another standard rule can be found at page 111: ' He implied that one ought not to sit out on Chelsea Embankment without a male escort. ' Women are obviously seen as the inferior sex, both in strength and character. Mr Wilcox made his money in business. Consequently, he has a decent work ethic, and is a practical mind. To him nothing is good or useful if it is not practical. Herein he sees the main contrast with the Schlegels: ' They are as clever as you make ' em, but unpractical! God bless me! One of these days they'll go too far. (...) Until they marry, they ought to have someone to look after them. '(p. 127) Being a practical mind, he has no heart for romance: ' Henry did not encourage Romance, and she was no girl to fidget for it. ' (p. 151) The Schlegel sisters live an inner life of ' passion and personal relationships', whereas the Wilcoxes live an outer life of ' telegrams and anger'. This can be seen as one of the main contrasts between Victorianism and upcoming ideologies in the Edwardian Era.

Victorianism is known for its cultivation of the ' stiff upper lip' and prudery, whereas the dawn of the twentieth century is marked by the demand for a more open society. A final key value of Victorianism is the knowledge of social codes of conduct, also embodied by Mr Wilcox. For example, when discussing the marriage arrangements, he demonstrates discretion by not literally mentioning the topic ' money,' since this would be too blunt: "' You

mean money. How stupid I am! Of course not! ” Oddly enough, he winced a little at the word. “ Yes.

Money, since you put it so frankly. ”’ (p. 153) Further, he does not plan the wedding before his daughter’s marriage, for the sake of civility: ‘ Lowering his voice and infusing a hint of reproof into it, he said: “ Evie will probably be married in September. We could scarcely think of anything before then. ”’ (p. 155) 2) The Schlegels The Schlegels, impersonating the liberal intelligentsia, have more cultural interests. They are deeply interested in the Arts; they attend a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony at the Queens Hall (pp. 6 - 33) and join dinner parties where social class and economy are discussed (pp 107 - 109). This particular discussion defines their opinion about social classes, and reveals a hint of socialism in their ideology. The girls advocate that the money - a millionaires inheritance - ought to be donated to people like Mr Bast, who have all the intellectual capacity to rise up in society, but who do not have the social and financial advantages the upper-middle class enjoys. Give them a chance. Give them the money. Don’t dole them out poetry, books and railway tickets like babies.

Give them the wherewithal to buy these things. (...) Give Mr Bast money, and don’t bother about his ideals. He’ll pick up those for himself. (pp. 108 - 109) They are infested with progressive ideas, and socialism at that time was gaining ground. The sisters are highly aware of the fact that they, like many others, owe their wealth to mere chance or birth or inheritance, while others, who might have just as much potential, do not share that luck. You and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands. It is so firm beneath our feet that we forget its very existence.

It's only when we see someone near us tottering that we realize all that an independent income means. (p. 52) Furthermore the Schlegels are the embodiment of the open-minded, emancipated women: " Aren't we differing on something much wider, Mrs Wilcox? Whether women are to remain what they have been since the dawn of history; or whether, since men have moved forward so far, they too may move forward a little now. I say they may. I would even admit a biological change. " (p. 66) After committing a youthful mistake by engaging herself to Paul, Helen gradually emancipates herself.

Never again does she bind herself to a man and eventually she ends up a single mother. Margaret may marry Henry, but maintains her independence, not only financially but also on a personal level. However, it must be said that both the Schlegels are at some point inclined to alter their ideology in the direction of the Wilcoxes, but in the end they stick to their own values and ideals (cf. *Infra*). As mentioned before, the Wilcoxes, and specifically Henry, have a practical mind. Henry does not care for passion or romance; he is a businessman.

The Schlegels, on the contrary, are rather emotive beings. Representing the open-minded, idealistic middle class, they attend great importance to spirituality and the inner life: [B]ecause personal relationships are the important thing for ever and ever, and not this outer life of telegrams and hatred. (p. 148) In conduct, the Schlegels are also more frank and direct than Mr Wilcox. At most times, they do illustrate knowledge of the codes of conduct, but on occasions they do not care much for these rather old-fashioned codes.

I have already mentioned one example: when Henry discusses the marriage arrangements, Margaret quite bluntly says ' money,' where Henry tried to avoid the use of such a direct expression. On page 155, Margaret's answer to Henry's proposal that they should not marry before Evie exhibits her knowledge of these social codes, but she prefers to ignore them: The earlier the nicer, Henry. Females are not supposed to say such things, but the earlier the nicer. 3) Forster's argument As I have mentioned, at some point both sisters experience influence of the Wilcoxes, and accept some of their values.

This proves that these ideologies are not entirely separated, and that throughout the story there are attempts to reconcile them by adapting one's ideology. Helen submits her ideology at the beginning of the story. She is - so to speak - infatuated with the entire Wilcox family and Howards End. Consequently she copies some of their ideas, mainly concerning the attitude towards the servants and women: He says the most horrid things about women's suffrage so nicely, and when I said I believed in equality he just folded his arms and gave me such a setting down as I've never had. Meg, shall we ever learn to talk less?

I never felt so ashamed of myself in my life. (p. 5) When her engagement to Paul breaks off, she picks up her old ideals - of equality and socialism - and even starts to despise the Wilcoxes. Margaret experiences the same evolution, only gradually, as she grows towards Mr Wilcox after marrying him. She starts to adopt the same image of women Helen adopted at the beginning of the story, as well as the same views on social class. She accepts the barrier between their class and the lower classes, such as the <https://assignbuster.com/howards-end-the-social-question-essay/>

Basts - she even writes to Helen that '[they] are no good' (p. 206) - and accepts that there will always be rich and poor.

Often she mentions her admiration for Henry's practicality, and accepts him for who he is. She mainly sticks to her own ideals, but starts appreciating his: An Empire bores me, so far, but I can appreciate the heroism that builds it up. (p. 95) However, in the end she detaches herself from these Victorian values, a turning point which is most vociferously verbalized during her outburst against Mr Wilcox. This passage expresses her contempt of the Victorian, capitalistic, imperialistic bourgeoisie. She attacks the image Victorianism is - to this very day - associated with: Stupid, hypocritical, cruel - oh!

Contemptible! - (...) These men are you. You can't recognize them, because you cannot connect. I've had enough of you unweeded kindness. (...) No one has ever told you what you are - muddled, criminally muddled. Men like you use repentance as a blind, so don't repent. (p. 263) Nonetheless, in the end, the two contrasting ideologies live together at Howards End. Most interesting about this co-existence is that no ideology has been traded for another. The Schlegels stick to their beliefs, and Mr Wilcox preserves his. They do not conflict anymore, nor have the two ideologies merged.

They are simply reconciled, as Forster had planned from the start: Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them. (p. 89) 4)

Conclusion The entire novel is centred on two conflicting ideologies during the transition from the Victorian Era into the Edwardian Era. These ideologies give separate answers to the question formulated by David Lodge (cf.

Supra). The contrasting answers reflect contrasting views on society and social class. By allowing the Schlegel sisters to alter their ideology and eventually return to their ideals, Forster argues that the prevalence of either ideology is neither preferable, nor possible.

He does not encourage conservatism, neither does he advocate enforced progress and the rejection of older values or even the breakdown of social class. He advocates harmony between the two ideologies, or as the novel's dictum goes: Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. (p. 159) 5) Bibliography

LODGE 2000 David Lodge, *Howards End*, Introduction, New York, Penguin Classics, 2000.