

Sea Imagery in E.M. Forster's *Howards End*

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Abstract

It has for long been undecided among critics whether Forster should be counted as belonging to the modernist literary tradition or not. This essay will analyse *Howards End*'s sea imagery, the notion of the sea when it is used as a symbol or in any other type of imagery. The sea when used as a symbol has several possible interpretations, and these interpretations have connection to the thoughts and mind-set of modernism and the flux and instability of the nascent modernity of the early twentieth century. By the understanding of *Howards End*'s sea imagery, the essay will take a stance in the debate about Forster's status within the modernist tradition. The essay will explore almost every instance of sea imagery in *Howards End* in order to discover its meaning and function. The essay will present two different interpretations of *Howards End*'s sea imagery, in order of their importance. The first one is "reactions to modernity", and the second one is "money, wealth and the abyss". These two interpretations are relatively broad and unspecific, and are used as headings or categories for the discussion, since the sea imagery in *Howards End* could be sorted into either one of these categories.

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1. Introduction

The sea is a common symbol in literature in general, used in many different genres, and understood by most readers to have meaning beyond the literal sense. The sea often represents change, flux and uncontrollability (De Vries 294-5). Therefore it is significant for the modernist period, a period of political, scientific and cultural change that lasted from approximately the late 19th century to early 20th century. This essay will discuss the function of sea imagery and how the sea is used as a symbol in a partly modernist novel, namely E.M. Forster's *Howards End*.

Forster's being a modernist writer or not is an unsettled issue among critics; Forster's status within modernism is undecided. This essay will argue that the way in which Forster uses sea imagery in *Howards End* shows connections to the period's general view of the world. Accordingly, it will also argue that *Howards End* is partly modernist. The main research question is thus: What significance and meaning does the sea imagery have in *Howards End*? In *Howards End*, the sea appears in the imagery less than twenty times during the whole novel. Consequently, it might not be readily accepted as particularly important, having such a minor role. This essay will show that the sea actually *is* important. There are indeed more prominent and perhaps more important symbols, discussed by for example Lionel Trilling (1962), but no literary critic, except one, namely David Medalie in *E.M. Forster's Modernism* (2002), has to my knowledge ever discussed the sea. Medalie's thoughts will be mentioned later in the text.

In *Howards End*, the sea functions as a symbol that carries overarching meaning in the novel, and is understood to be a symbol via numerous instances where the sea is used in a metaphor or simile. The repetition or the way that the sea recurs in the narrative is what makes the reader understand that it is meant to have symbolic meaning. Furthermore, a reason for which sea imagery appears less obvious and therefore more intriguing is that Forster's novel is set in London and in the countryside. Thus, the symbol does not correlate with the setting.

The sea seems to be a symbol that Forster held near in mind and often chose. Forster uses sea imagery in *Howards End*, in his novel *A Room with a View*, originally published in 1908, and in his series of lectures printed under the name *Aspects of the Novel* (1949). Sea imagery seems to be Forster's style, as it were, if one believes that authors develop a linguistic style, their own way of putting together words and symbols to create their own hallmark, a style which the reader immediately recognizes as Forster, or whoever the author in question is. Forster does not use the sea as a symbol in *Aspects of the Novel*, but he frequently uses semantically related

expressions, just as he does in *Howards End*. Related expressions, i.e. shore, wave, ripple, the deep, island etc. will be discussed under the same conditions as the sea, since they are concepts that semantically are included within the concept of the sea (sea being the superordinate word). This essay's analysis is limited to notions related to the sea. There is quite a lot of imagery with water, and notions related to water in *Howards End*. This imagery seems to have approximately the same meaning and function, but is excluded in order to deepen the analysis about sea imagery.

The essay will begin with a background chapter containing three different parts; an introduction to the sea as a symbol in literature in general, a brief introduction to modernism, and finally a comment on literary critics' opinions on Forster's status within modernism. It will continue with an analysis of *Howards End*, through an historical reading, in which several of the similes and metaphors will be analysed individually, in order to discover how they contribute to an overarching meaning. A very brief consideration of the symbol's change and evolution throughout the novel will be included. Until now, critics have focused on everything but the sea while discussing *Howards End*. This essay will propose a new perspective and light another candle in the chandelier that is *Howards End*'s complexity.

2. Background

Symbolic language is understood by generalisation and association, by finding some kind of similarity between the literal sense and the figurative sense (Alm-Arvius 24). In this essay, for the sake of clarity, a distinction between the different figures of speech that exist will be kept. Throughout the essay, every instance of figurative language will be referred to by what that instance is, whether it is a metaphor, a simile, an anaphor or any other figure of speech.

The sea is a common symbol in literature in general, it is a public symbol, which means that it is understood by every single member of the same nationality and culture. For English writers, the symbol seems to be a near at hand symbol, being surrounded by sea as England is. The British culture of seafaring have left traces in the language and in literature (Alm-Arvius 15), and the sea is therefore always near in mind for British novelists. However, in *Howards End* the sea is also a private symbol, it has specific symbolic value in the work which stems from something private or personal of the author. The specific symbolical value and meaning in *Howards End* is quite similar to the meaning of the sea as a public symbol.

The sea has had different functions in literature during different literary epochs. In Romantic poetry, the sea is often idealised and functions as a positive force on the characters. In the

beginning of the twentieth century and onwards into the modernist period, the sea is depicted in a calmer and more muted way, and it now functions as a negative force on the characters (Rein 7-8). Jonathan Raban (1993) argues that the sea in modernist fiction is either portrayed as “cruel” or as “a realm of escape and renewal” (Raban, qtd. in Rein 8). In *Howards End* the sea is portrayed in both ways, and even though the above quote is about setting, it is applicable to the interpretation of a metaphor as well. For example “the gold islets that raised [the Schlegel family] from the sea” (264), the sea here being more or less synonymous with the abyss, functioning as a negative force on Leonard because he is among the “struggling”, and as a positive force on Tibby, “[giving] all the praise to himself, and so despised the struggling and the submerged” (264).

Armstrong offers an apt definition of modernism. It is “a cultural expression of modernity and “a series of international artistic movements in the period 1900-40, characterized by their sense of engagement with ideas of the ‘new’” (24). The period commonly known as the modernist period was thus one of cultural and artistic change, affecting the literature written during the period. To simplify it, modernism was a literary trend, or rather many related literary trends, which operated during the late Edwardian era until the mid-war period. It saw texts that were experimental in form and style, and many famous authors, including Forster¹, but also for example Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, were engaged in discussions about the correct form of fiction, which means that the artistic experimental practises in literature brought about considerations of how literature ought to be.

There were three sub-periods; early modernism, high modernism and late modernism (Armstrong 24), all of which showed different features in style and explored different trends within literature. Forster was an early modernist, but he also displayed many features typical of the earlier Edwardian and Victorian era. *Howards End* is set in the Edwardian period, when the societal changes of urbanization, imperial expansion and female emancipation were still in their cradle. Common for all of the three sub-periods was that the modernist writers strove to break conventions and to use the language in original and untried ways, for example by intentionally breaking grammatical rules, the stream of consciousness technique and alternative plot patterns. Modernist writing became an artistic adventure, new realities were created which defied rationalism and the technological advancements of the time. Modernist writing also made attempts at exploring the self and the consciousness. Because of the focus on consciousness, modernist narrative expressed the passing of time as “time in the mind” rather than “time on

¹ See for example Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1949).

the clock” (Woolf, 1928, qtd. in Stevenson 214). Additionally, modernist narratives often consist of discontinuous events (Rein 37). Dissimilarly, *Howards End* is being narrated in consecutive time, i.e. one event after another.

The period also saw the beginning of mass-consumption. It was a period of increasing secularisation, and a period that saw “the discourse of rationalization, progress and autonomy; the abolition of superstition and the mastery of nature” (Armstrong 2-3). There was a widespread fear that modern technology would demand more energy of the human mind than it could handle, which would in illness (Armstrong 92). In modernist literature, the sea works either as a counterforce to this, being still and calm and helping to give the characters peace of mind, or confirming this, being tempestuous and wild. It also symbolizes something that man could never master.

Modernist use of symbols was more intricate than before. The symbols demanded more of the readers’ imagination and ability to solve out the symbol, almost as a riddle. This is not wholly the case with the sea in *Howards End*. The sea is somewhat easy to identify as a symbol, and fairly easy to interpret, but in order to do that the reader must notice the individual metaphors and similes and recognize its symbolic meaning. Since the sea appears a lesser amount of times than many other symbols in *Howards End*, it may be harder to discern. The sea is further mostly used in simple similes and metaphors. The symbol’s connection to modernism thus lies in its meaning, not in its form. This supports the claim that the novel is partly modernist, sharing certain modernist impulses, but are not stylistically similar to the typical modernists.

It must be remembered that the boundaries between different periods are not always clear-cut; a starting point and ending date cannot be determined in detail. Features from different periods may overlap and be present in the same work, and *Howards End* is an evident example of this. In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster himself argues against classifying literature according to period of time (Forster 15). Forster claims that when one analyses literature, aspects other than period of time should be paramount. Accordingly, every work of literature must also be considered on its own, not *only* with an historical background, though an historical background *will* give knowledge which would otherwise be missed.

Howards End was first published in 1910. Thus, it falls within the time span of the period of modernism, but, as mentioned, it is important to distinguish between period and style, since works of literature that could be labelled ‘modernist’ have certain significant features of style and form, for example experimental practices that have been briefly described above. *Howards End* is not stylistically modernist. On the contrary it has features that were common during the

earlier Edwardian period and its precedent the Victorian era, which to some extent coincides with the Romantic Movement. For the Romantic novelists, themes like spirituality, imagination and intuition were central and the texts showed affirmation of a world which was still rural and undestroyed by industrialisation (Stevenson 211). This is beyond doubt the case in *Howards End*, displayed by the Schlegel sisters, who endorses the inner life as opposed to the outer life of “telegrams and anger” (23). David Lodge, in the introduction to the 2000 Penguin edition of *Howards End*, claims that *Howards End* has little in common with the works of the major modernist novelists, who “reacted strongly against the form of the nineteenth century novel, in which, typically, a *complex plot is narrated and commented on by an omniscient authorial voice*” (Lodge, xxii, my emphasis). The form of *Howards End* is exactly what is italicized in the quote above.

This discussion about modernist versus Edwardian and Romantic features may seem contradictory, but is presented to stress that *Howards End* is only partly modernist, and that *Howards End*’s modernism lies in the meaning of *Howards End*’s sea imagery. Because of this, critics have found it difficult to categorize Forster in general and *Howards End* specifically. In his article on *Howards End*, Michael Levenson (1985) classifies Forster as:

belong[ing] neither with the stout Edwardians...nor with the lean modernists....He shared with the latter a sense of an irrevocable historical transformation that necessarily alters the methods of art, but he could never muster the conviction for a programmatic assault on traditional forms. For this reason he continues to occupy an ambiguous position in the history of modern fiction. (295-6)

By this Levenson means that Forster in his novels critiques modernity, but remains traditional in style. K. W. Gransden (1962) would rather categorize *Howards End* as an Edwardian novel (54), whereas Malcolm Bradbury (1966) describes Forster as “a late Victorian somehow perpetuated into the tradition of the twentieth century novel (1). Forster himself said, somewhat jokingly, that he belonged to “the fag-end of Victorian liberalism” (Smith 106). Randall Stevenson (2007) follows the same line when claiming: “Forster was scarcely a modernist” (209), with the motivation that his style is too different from the major modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Alistair M. Duckworth (1992) describes Forster as having an “awkward relationship to modernism” (qtd in Ridge 122). Finally, Andrew Thacker (2003) discusses *Howards End* together with modernist works, but he concedes that “[Forster’s] work is not pre-modernist, or nearly-modernist, or even anti-modernist, but rather as engaged in

producing an attitude towards modernity different from that exemplified by writers such as Woolf or Joyce” (48). This is what I believe to be the truest, in *Howards End* Forster displays a reaction towards modernity, but does not use the same form of narrative techniques as the “typical” modernists. Thus, critics are fairly in agreement about Forster’s being or not being a modernist writer.

David Medalie (2002) is the only critic who has found sea imagery to be important in *Howards End*, and proposed its connection to modernism. Medalie follows the same line as the other critics, arguing that Forster’s “reluctant modernism...offers a discrete set of responses to a range of early twentieth century anxieties...” (1). Medalie claims *Howards End* to be a work of “nascent modernism” (2), which makes sense because of *Howards End* being written and published in the earlier part of the period, and to be exploring different threats of modernity, for example overpopulation, unemployment, urbanization, growth of the suburbs and the consequential “whittling away of the countryside” (9). The exploration is not only via sea imagery, but also via other symbols, characters’ actions and comments made by the narrator.

Medalie recognizes that sea imagery has connection to modernism, but he focuses on the notion of the island, both England and islands of money, meaning that “modernity [is] a tidal force of dissolution that eats away at the islands of tradition and refuge” (8). He further argues that in *Howards End* “the ephemerality and restlessness of the city life are presented as a new version of the old war between the island and the ocean” (8). He places the notion of an island in opposition to modernity, meaning that an island can be meticulously measured and controlled by its limited area, while the changes modernity has brought seem uncontrollable (8).

Medalie also discusses Forster’s relation to liberalism and humanism and that Forster’s representation and acknowledgement of those should be emphasized instead of or in relation to modernism, meaning that Forster’s relation to modernism is of lesser importance in the understanding of *Howards End* as a whole. This is not a satisfactory conclusion; the relation to modernism is among the most important aspects of *Howards End*. The subjects, themes and symbolism of *Howards End* all show connection to modernism, therefore it cannot be anything but important.

It needs to be pointed out that several critics, for example Lord David Cecil (1966) and F. R. Leavis (1966), have found it difficult to reconcile Forster’s two modes, namely that his novels (*Howards End* included) first of all are social comedies, where the plot to a high degree serves to highlight social issues, but that Forster every now and then switches the style of his language to a more poetic mode, where he uses symbolism. This combination makes it possible for Forster to be both a symbolist and a novelist of social manners, but once again, many critics

have found these two modes impossible to reconcile. Of course, Forster uses symbolism also in his ordinary writing, where he is a novelist of social manners, but these two modes need to be presented because they complicate Forster's use of the sea in *Howards End*'s imagery. Forster uses sea imagery in both modes, but in his poetic mode the sea is harder to discern as a symbol.

3. The sea as a symbol in *Howards End*

Howards End is a novel about England's fate. It is a story of the class war. The war is latent but actual – so actual indeed that a sword is literally drawn and a man is really killed. England herself appears in the novel in palpable form, for the story moves by symbols and not only all its characters but also an elm, a marriage, a symphony, and a scholar's library stand for things beyond themselves. The symbol for England is the house whose name gives title to the book. (Trilling 102)

Sea imagery is only a small part of *Howards End*'s elaborate, intricate, rich weave of imagery. It is therefore probably not immediately perceived by most readers as particularly important, perhaps not even noticeable in a first reading. This analysis will show that the sea actually is important, because first and foremost it reveals the novel's connection to modernism and Forster's disapproval of modernity. It also contributes to one of the novel's subjects, namely the class struggle, voiced by Lionel Trilling (1962) as "Who shall inherit England?" (102).

To Lionel Trilling's list of pertinent symbols, I would therefore like to add the sea. The sea is not very prominent or permeating in *Howards End*, considering its plot and setting. There are other symbols that give the impression of being more closely related to the story, because they correlate with either the plot or the setting. Biographically, Forster was fond of Mediterranean culture and its ancient nature worship (Lodge xv). This might be a reason for Forster to use the sea as a symbol, because it is natural and still undestroyed by modernity.

Forster uses sea imagery in three different ways. First of all it is, as already proposed, a symbol that has overarching meaning in the novel. Second, it is used in similes and metaphors, many of which will be mentioned in the following chapter. Third, the sea is often mentioned in the poetic mode that Forster frequently uses. For example: "He saw her volcanoes, paled, for the sun, who had lit them up, was coming to light the earth. Sea of Serenity, Sea of Tranquillity, Ocean of the Lunar Storms, merged into one lucent drop, itself to slip into the sempiternal

dawn” (275). This metaphor describing Jacky Bast is somewhat less clear and harder to interpret than much of Forster’s other sea imagery. These examples need to be presented in order to clarify that there is quite a lot of sea imagery in *Howards End*. In conclusion, the sea recurs in the novel again and again, if one only looks for it.

In her master’s thesis about the sea as a symbol in modern fiction, Elena Rein (2014) makes an important distinction, namely that between symbol and setting. In *Howards End*, it is certainly a symbol, but the novel is not set by the sea, except for a short passage where the sisters visit their aunt in Swanage. The sea is thus an unlikely symbol in *Howards End*. I will not go further in this matter, but merely conclude that this distinction must be kept in mind while both reading and analysing so as not to confuse the two terminologies. A symbol can be both physically present in the setting and function as a symbol of a novel, or either one of the alternatives; i.e. either appear in the setting or function as a symbol.

As a symbol, the sea represents many things in *Howards End*. The first and most important interpretation is a reaction to modernity. The sea as a symbol displays Forster’s disapproval of what is modern and unknown: smelly cars, technology and the expanding suburbs. It represents a somewhat nostalgic yearning back to the rural countryside and what is natural and idyllic. The second most important interpretation is money, wealth and the abyss, all three of which are so connected to each other that it is possible and suitable to discuss them under the same heading or within the same category. Money and wealth are obviously also connected to the class struggle, which really isn’t a struggle in *Howards End*, except for Leonard and his wife, but more of an exploration of the characteristics of different classes and their difficulty with living together and understanding each other at the same level, or more aptly put, their difficulty to “Only Connect”.

The following section of the essay will discuss both of these two interpretations in detail. However, it should be pointed out that both interpretations are somewhat connected to each other. The societal changes of modernity brought about economic circumstances, the novel for example emphasises urbanisation, that drove “the lower orders” (20) to the verge of the abyss or even into the abyss. The division between the two interpretations is made on account of structure and readability. Money, wealth and the abyss are less relevant for the argument about *Howards End* being a partly modernist novel, but are still included because they form a large part of *Howards End*’s sea imagery, and to leave it out would be to lose the bigger picture.

4. Reactions to Modernity

The sea in *Howards End* represents a feeling of uncertainty and a recognition of problems related to modernity. For Forster, this feeling of uncertainty was based on societal changes. Thus, it is an uncertainty of both the present modernity and the future, the novel implying that the modern worries are becoming worse and worse. In the novel, we can discern a contrast, or an opposition, between what is old and what is new, or modern. Forster uses the sea in his imagery as a contrast to the modernity. The sea has associations to nature and rural, traditional life, far away from the noise and pollution of London and its suburbs. The sea thus represents what is natural and old and stands in opposition to symbols that represent what is new. Examples from *Howards End* are trains and train stations, stations which to Margaret suggest infinity (10). Infinity is, interestingly, also a common interpretation of the sea as a symbol. Looking out at a vast sea suggests infinity more than perhaps anything else.

The sea as a symbol represents uncontrolled change and a powerlessness towards the societal changes. On her way to Shropshire, Margaret contemplates: “But she felt their whole journey from London had been unreal. They had no part with the earth and its emotions. They were dust, and a stink, and cosmopolitan chatter, and the girl whose cat had been killed had lived more deeply than they” (183). Here Forster makes Margaret display what many people felt during this period, that the old, rural, family-based life (the Schlegels would perhaps call it the real life) was being lost in favour of urbanization and technology. Another example is from chapter sixteen:

The age of property holds bitter moments even for a proprietor. When a move is imminent, furniture becomes ridiculous, and Margaret now lay awake at nights wondering where, where on earth they and all their belongings would be deposited in September next. Chairs, tables, pictures, books that had rumbled down to them through the generations, must rumble forward again like a slide of rubbish to which she longed to give the final push, and send it toppling into the sea. (127)

This passage can partly be seen as criticism against the materialism that industrialization had made possible during the period, and partly as criticism against the break-up of traditions. The Schlegels’ house is being torn down in order to build new and massive tenement houses. Margaret complains about it: “I hate this continual flux of London. It is an epitome of us at our worst – eternal formlessness; all the qualities, good, bad and an different, streaming away –

streaming, streaming for ever. That's why I dread it so. I mistrust rivers, even in scenery. Now, the sea –“(156). The flux and fast change of London is being compared to streaming waters. The sea thus becomes a symbol of the loss of all that is old and traditional. This is by far not the only examples of Forster's critique of the modern, there is quite a lot throughout the whole novel.

Another example is this one: “One had the sense of a backwater, or rather of an estuary, whose waters flowed in from the invisible sea, and ebbed into a profound silence while the waves without were still beating” (6). This is the architectural change and flux of London being described, and, importantly, the Schlegels are still unaffected by it. Here it may be interesting to note the symbolic significance of the fact that while the houses of London are being torn down, Howards End the house remains standing and will remain standing for a long time because of Helen's and Margaret's dwelling there. Emily Ridge (2013) suggests that Howards End the house represents stability in a rapidly changing world. The words of Henry Wilcox, while giving advice about Leonard's occupation, implies the same thing. ”safe as houses, safer”, about the company Leonard is about to work in (161). Houses remain standing and can because of that maintain traditions through generations. The idiom “safe as houses” is used on several occasions in the novel, implying its importance. Interestingly, the novel also implies that in reality, houses aren't safe at all. The houses of London are constantly being torn down and rebuilt, and both the Wilcox and the Schlegel family are changing houses during the stretch of time of the novel, and the unfortunate Bast couple ends up homeless.

In chapter eleven of *Howards End*, when Ruth Wilcox has passed away, the narrator comments on the event with an ambiguous formulation, in which the second meaning implies the uncertainty about the future which is inherent to modernism. “It is thus, if there is any rule, that we ought to die - neither as victim nor as fanatic, but as the seafarer who can greet with equal eye the deep that he is entering, and the shore that he must leave” (87). The first denotation of this simile is of course a person dying who must accept both death, the deep, and life, the shore. But it can also be read as the deep representing the general, collective future, and the shore representing the past. In this passage, the sea symbolizes the uncertainty about the future that was characteristic of the modernist period.

Mrs Wilcox's death has more symbolic meaning.

She was parting from these Wilcoxes for the second time. Paul and his mother, ripple and great wave, had flowed into her life and ebbed out of it for ever. The ripple had left left no traces behind; the wave had strewn at her feet fragments torn from the unknown. A

curious seeker, [Margaret] stood for a while at the verge of the sea that tells so little, but tells a little, and watched the outgoing of this last tremendous tide. (87)

In this passage the sea imagery is prominent. Mrs Wilcox is compared to the sea, which, when she dies, withdraws like a tremendous tide. The overall symbolic meaning of Mrs Wilcox's death is the metaphorical death of the old, rural life. Mrs Wilcox is in *Howards End* described as being connected to the earth, and to "belong...to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it" (19). Thus, when she dies, everything that is traditional and old dies with her. This passage's connection to modernism is thus that it reveals the anxiety for the loss of the traditional and displays a reaction towards it. It is also significant that Mrs Wilcox, representing tradition and rurality, is a "great wave", while Paul, who in *Howards End* endorses modernity and imperialism, is only a "ripple".

The sea in *Howards End* also suggests another notion, somewhat related to the others, namely fate. Levenson (1985) argues that "*Howards End*, like so much of Forster's work, suggests that the incidents which determine the broad course of life...exceed the reach of individual will" (297). Because of the uncertainty congenial to modernism, fate seems to be an apt subject for Forster. Face to face with great societal changes, Forster implies that the changes are not always possible to control. It can also be viewed upon as the sea representing time which must pass before England can rise from the ashes and become recreated in a better state and condition than before, time being as uncontrollable as the sea.

Remembering that Trilling (1962) argued that *Howards End* was a novel about England's fate, there is another paragraph where sea imagery is used to depict England's past and unknown future. In this passage, England is also personified.

England was alive, throbbing through all her estuaries, crying for joy through the mouths of all her gulls, and the north wind, with contrary motion, blew stronger against her rising seas. What did it mean? For what end are her fair complexities, her changes of soil, her sinuous coast? Does she belong to those who have moulded her and made her feared by other lands, or to those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world's fleet accompanying her towards eternity? (150)

There is yet another example of when sea imagery is used to suggest fate: "...chafing against the ultimate Fate, who holds all the seas in the palm of her hand" (150). The whole metaphor

stretches over pages 150 and 151, and is too long to quote in full, but it describes Margaret's contemplating over the difficulties of love outside of marriage. The exact word "seas" indicates the inappropriate love relationships, in the same passage called "the troubled waters". This example also has to do with the fate of England by denoting the "Who shall inherit England?" (Trilling 102). The one that inherits England is Leonard's and Helen's child, whose parents indeed swam in the troubled waters. Thus it contributes to the novel's overall meaning by its inclusion of a subject, namely the class struggle and its related theme saying that different classes should or should not try to connect with each other (in this matter the novel is still undecided). The whole passage is also another good example of Forster's poetic mode.

5. Money, Wealth and the Abyss

The division between classes is unquestionably an important subject of *Howards End*, and the "odours from the abyss" (100, 197), in the ominous words of the omniscient narrator, are constantly permeating the text. In several instances of the text, the sea is used as a symbol of the abyss. Margaret Schlegel says that: "we are standing on these islands, and that most of the others are down below the surface of the sea" (52). This is the first example of the sea being used to illustrate the social structure, the classes or the layers of society. On the same page she says: "...the piles of money that keep our feet above the waves", and further down: "...we forget that below the sea people do want to steal [umbrellas], ..., and that what's a joke up here is down there reality" (52). This extended metaphor clearly gives an overarching symbolic meaning to the sea. The Schlegels' money is compared to islands, which "keep [their] feet above the waves". The poor, the people of the abyss, are said to be "below" the sea, since they have no money to stand on, and are therefore metaphorically drowning. The similarity to land being spatially higher up than the sea is clear. The metaphor recurs when Leonard comes to visit the Schlegels: "...the exact size of the golden island upon which he stands" (120), obviously indicating how much money Leonard has. It recurs again in the end: "the gold islets that raised them from the sea" (264). The metaphor of the island is a trope used in Edwardian literature, commonly expressing social quandary (Medalie 10). Forster's use of sea imagery in this passage thus has both modernist and Edwardian features and influences. This further supports the claim that *Howards End* is partly modernist.

Every mentioning of the sea in this passage seems to suggest the societal structure, except perhaps this one: "...as fast as our pounds crumble away into the sea they are renewed - from the sea, yes, from the sea" (52). The sea is here used as a symbol of the stock-market, from

which the Schlegel sisters (and brother) earn their income. Obviously, the stock market is also related to the societal and financial structure. The fact that it is Helen who “steals” Leonard’s umbrella is a statement of Forster’s that classes are not so different after all; if the circumstances lead to it, everyone might steal an umbrella.

In the same passage, Forster, through Margaret, uses an anaphor, he repeats the last phrase of the sentence to make the language more intense and poetic: “...as fast as our pounds crumble away into the sea they are renewed – *from the sea, yes, from the sea*” (52, my emphasis). Forster does this on several occasions throughout the whole novel. According to Alm-Arvius (2003), “...lexical repetitions of a schematic, rhythmic character...are especially associated with poetry” (52). This poetic language is contrasted against the comic, more casual language of other passages to create a feeling of uncertainty. This is the same thing as the two modes or styles mentioned earlier, and this constant changing of mode/style compels the reader to beware, to never feel fully secure or to settle with what is known.

Biographically, this poetic language may be rooted in Forster’s interest in music, making it easier for him to combine prose and rhythm. It can also be seen as a breach of conventions in the modernist manner, prose not being as typically infused with musical and/or rhythmical elements as poetry is. Above all, however, it reflects the insecurity and uncertainty of the modernist period of time.

The formulation “...keep our feet above the waves” similar to the idiom ‘keep one’s head above water’ carries another implication. The choice of words suggests that even though the Schlegels are presently safe from the threatening, ominous sea, their situation can change. The sea thus represents a false sense of security and an uncertainty, and it is this uncertainty that is inherent to modernism. The sea as a symbol stands in opposition to land, land which is still safe while the sea is threatening. Thus, the symbol in itself contains an opposition to be added to the already long list of oppositions or contrasted forces that *Howards End* is admittedly full of (Fransson 2).

The extended metaphor on page 52 holds yet another meaning. Norman Friedman (1955) claims that literal immersion in the sea is a symbol of “surrender and transition” (Friedman, qtd. in Rein 57). Even though the Bast couple is not literally immersed in the sea, they are certainly facing transition, their lives are changing, and not for the better either. This interpretation becomes a metaphor within another metaphor, i.e. the Basts are metaphorically immersed which leads to another interpretation, namely surrender and transition. Friedman’s argument concerns sea fiction, and *Howards End* can hardly be classified as sea fiction, even though a short episode takes place by the sea. The interpretation is applicable to sea imagery in

non-sea fiction as well, though at least on a non-literal level, because the interpretation of a metaphor is in a way still what happens to the characters. Different elements of a novel may be connected on different levels of understanding, and combining these elements may lead to the exposition of meaning which would otherwise have been invisible.

Sam Bluefarb, in his 1959 article about the sea in fiction and drama, explains that the sea can function as a symbol of escape, via the literal going out to sea. Just as Friedman's article, it is an article mostly concerned with the sea as a setting, but still it makes clear that the sea can symbolize escape also in non-sea fiction. This interpretation is true for Leonard, who tries to escape his dull life by acquiring culture. He hopes to one day "push his head out of the *gray waters*..." (42, my emphasis). Importantly, he fails, because he does not have the financial means, but the novel also implies that the "gulf" between the classes is too wide and many "are wrecked in trying to cross it" (113), meaning that Leonard simply can't, because culture isn't for him and the other members of his class.

Furthermore, the sea can be seen as a huge, ungraspable mass, which is what the people of the abyss are similar to according to the narrator: "they are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet" (38). The novel, through Margaret and Helen who are concerned with saving Mr and Mrs Bast, poses the relevant question of how the people of the abyss can be helped. David Medalie states: "The modernists were preoccupied with the problem of morality and the intricacy (sometimes the impossibility) of moral choices..." (33). This also shows Forster's (via the Schlegels') reaction towards modernity.

6. The symbol's evolution

It may be rewarding to consider if the symbol changes or evolves during the narrative, and if so, in what way. In *Howards End* it is more frequently used in the first half of the novel. This reflects the fact that the division between classes is more manifest in the beginning of the story, before Henry's and Margaret's somewhat forced marriage and before the birth of Helen's and Leonard's classless heir. Towards the end, through the above mentioned and other implausible events, the classes are, in a sense, united, or if not united at least the differences between them have become less important.

Going through every instance of sea imagery in *Howards End*, there seems to be no particular evolvement (except in frequency), the sea imagery seems to appear at random. Nor seems there to be any connection to characters or particular events in the novel, this would otherwise have given the sea imagery further depth. On the very final page of the novel, Forster

finishes with a sea simile, in order to stress the sea's importance: "And again and again fell the word, like the ebb of a dying sea" (292).

This simile is also very signifying of the sea's overall meaning. It is noteworthy that the sea is "dying". Since a literal sea cannot die, this simile suggests that it is the different denotations of the sea as a symbol that is dying. The word that fell "again and again" is good-bye, which is an apt way to finish a novel. It may also be understood as Forster saying good-bye the old, traditional life.

7. Conclusion

This essay set out to analyse *Howards End's* sea imagery in order to discover its possible meanings, hoping to find particular meaning related to modernism. The essay has shown that the sea indeed is important. The essay has picked up a thread that has been left dangling for decades, new and up-to-date research has been sparse. Remembering that classifying a novelist in time and place may limit as well as increase the possible interpretations of his or her novel, this essay has come to the conclusions that: Forster's position as a novelist in time is undecided, and even though critics have mostly agreed upon in which chronological "category" Forster belongs, they only agree of the fact that Forster is difficult to classify, *Howards End's* imagery has meaning which can be related to modernism and finally that it is the particular symbol of the sea that helps to reveal this meaning.

Answering the main research question, the sea has significance as an important symbol in *Howards End*. The symbol has several interpretations, which are, in the same order as presented in the text: Infinity, reactions to modernity, nostalgic yearning, uncertainty about the future and powerlessness towards societal changes, fate, money, wealth and the abyss, the stock market, surrender and transition, and finally also connection, because the sea connects different places but is difficult to cross, somewhat indicating the "Only connect" which is the novel's epigraph. The most important interpretations are "reactions to modernity" and "money, wealth and the abyss", which are somewhat above the other, or rather, the other interpretations are structurally included in these two. The novel has shown that "reactions to modernity" is not only a reaction, but also a sadness in losing something known and loved, and it is in this that the symbol comes to its right the most, artistically.

This essay has shown that the sea imagery of *Howards End* has connection to the thoughts and mind-set of modernism, but perhaps that is not enough to regard Forster an entirely

modernist novelist or *Howards End* an entirely modernist novel. That is why this essay concludes that *Howards End* is a partly modernist work.

For what does all of this matter? To include Forster within the tradition of modernism may lead to new and fruitful interpretations of other aspects of Forster and *Howards End* by combining, not just the imagery, but other aspects as well, with modernism i.e. it becomes a whole new field of research by possibly generating new ideas. Less fortunately, to include Forster within the aforesaid tradition may also lead to a limiting of possible interpretations or analyses, because it may narrow the analysts scope, i.e. when putting on the modernist glasses, one sees nothing else. However, the increasing and limiting of ideas are just two sides of the same coin.

Regardless of *Howards End*'s degree of modernism, the novel has the capacity to grow and to expose something new with every reading and every reader, and that is, perhaps more important than everything else, what good literature ought to do. It renders *Howards End* timeless, to be appreciated through centuries. When the societal changes of *Howards End* have passed, the novel remains significant as a representation of reactions towards modernity, no matter when the modernity occurs, as it were, because of society's constant development, there will always be modernity.

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