

The Fantasies of E. M. Forster to Explore the Inner Self in his Short Stories

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Abstract

Forster has used fantasy as a technique with his characteristic ironic prose style combining poetry and symbolism. So it is necessary to define fantasy and examine its use as a fictional technique in general and E. M. Forster in particular because as Forster claims, most of his short stories are fantasies in form. With his characteristic ironical personal style, Forster has been able to explore his inner experiences, his self, through these fantasies, by using symbols and poetry in them, and by giving allegorical dimension to them. He also shows how this inner self confronts with the society of the world.

Key words: Aspects, Faun, Fantasies, Ghosts, Pseudo, Supernatural, Technique.

Introduction

In his introduction to *Collected Short Stories* E. M. Forster writes: *These fantasies were written at various dates previous to the First World War, and represent all that I have accomplished in a particular line.*¹

John Colmer observes: Fantasy occupies a curious middle ground between allegory and symbolism. It establishes its own laws, revels in swift flights of fancy, is playful, often, witty, makes great demands on its readers. This is the central critical question to be asked about Forster; and the short stories are the first of his works to pose it.²

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Fantasy has been variously used by novelists as well as short story writers as a convenient narrative technique; it is akin to Aristotle's concept of marvelous. It helps the writer transcend the boundaries of the real world. According to C. S. Lewis fantasy is a narrative that deals with impossible and preternatural.³ But it is always rooted in realism. It provides a wider framework to the writer's vision to reflect upon life and society of his life. The characters seem to inhabit a world different from that of ours, but their experiences obliquely reflect on this world. It is only experience liberated, so to speak, experience disengaged, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, of the inconveniences of a related, measurable state. The flight of imagination does not take the readers too far away to make the real world invisible.

There are many instances of the uses of fantasy, in its different forms in fiction. Cervantes makes a marvelous use of fantasy in his book *Don Quixote*. When *Don Quixote* fights with the windmill, thinking it to be a giant, the long-honored concept of knighthood is ridiculed. The use of fantasy has been made so beautifully that it has become an integral part of the book. Our centre of attraction is the fantastic action of the knight. *Don Quixote* represents romantic notion of knight errantry. The discordance between romance and commonsense is the point of fantasy there.

E. M. Forster attaches a great importance to fantasy and he devotes one full chapter to the discussion of fantasy in his book, *Aspects of the novel*. Every fantasy is a comment on life. It is

way of perceiving the truth. Forster is of the opinion that fiction has both human beings and a bundle of various things which are not human beings.⁴ Fantasy is concerned with those which are not human beings. The extraordinary or superhuman behaviors of the human beings are the subjects of fantasy. Forster writes: There is more in the novel than time or people or logic or any of their derivatives, more even than fate. We shall give that bar of light two names, fantasy and prophecy.⁵

A novel must have a story, characters and plot. And they may be sufficient for a naturalistic writer like Bennett or Galsworthy. But a poet with some vision must have something else, something like the fantastic-prophetic axis, and this something is an essential part of his work. If it is taken away, little of interest remains in him. Forster assertively points out: Deprive them of it, and a book remains which still resembles Harry Richmond or Shirley or D.H. Lawrence or Swift, and nothing is left at all.⁶

Fantasy concerns itself with something which is improbable, marvelous and extraordinary. Naturally some extra-attention from the reader is needed to such a work. Forster rightly says: Fantasy asks us to pay something extra.

When Forster says that something extra, he means a willing suspension of disbelief. Rudolf E. Schertel, supporting the view of Forster writes: We must be even more willing to suspend our disbelief when we read a fantasy than when we read ordinary fiction.⁸

This critical statement means that the readers have to suspend their disbelief in order to understand the relevance of mythological characters and places of ancient glories. We can say that Forster's something extra means the imaginative powers to grasp the symbolic roles of the characters and places. It would be relevant here to point out that in many respects fantasy and prophecy look alike. Both use gods, myths and other supernatural agents to transcend the limitations of the physical world. Distinguishing between fantasy and prophecy, Forster writes: They are alike in having gods, and unlike in the gods they have..., Pans and puns, all that is medieval this side of the grave.⁹

Fantasy, the lower of the pair, deals with anything from Fauns and Dryads to slips of the memory, verbal coincidences, puns and pranks. In short, it includes all things which involves directly and indirectly a double meaning. What we observe on the surface is transformed by placing it into another framework, the framework of some mythology. The supernatural is involved in fantasy, but the superhuman or the divine is beyond its scope. Forster remarks correctly: The power of fantasy penetrates into every corner of the universe. Penetrating and bitter criticism of conduct and civilization.¹⁰ Prophecy for Forster does bear a relation to those forces. It is a bardic quality, a tone of voice. Forster defines prophecy by stating that: It may imply any of the faiths that have haunted humanity with that we are not directly concerned.¹¹

The mythology or prophecy, unlike that of fantasy, suggests unity, a meaning of physical reality with some universal element, and its mythology are related to no established religion, has no artifice about it, no framework which is arbitrarily established around the people and the normal world. The writer of prophetic vision does not make a direct statement about that universe. He does not necessarily say something about it. Rather he merges not only his characters but his readers into that universe through the power of his voice, through the tonal quality of that voice. Forster's novels and stories are full of illustrations of both expressed and implied fantasy. He uses Dryads Orion, Demeters, Ghosts and Fauns in obvious forms. Even places in his fiction attain supernatural powers. They have a spirit. They are like actors and measure the human sensibility. Austen Warren's observation on the use of fantasy in the fiction of Forster is very illuminating: The element of fantasy, with Forster... so that the familiar landscape gains an arresting strangeness.¹²

Forster found among his predecessors and contemporaries some models of fantasy in fiction, but he gave it a definite orientation. Kipling in his *Jungle Tales*, mostly used the animal myth. H. G.

Wells broke a new ground in making his stories and novels highly entertaining in themselves. They also contain an implicit warning against the miracle-monster-science. Munro used fantasy for satirical purposes, and Henry James made use of fantasy in *The Turn of the Screw* to evoke the subconscious guilt and fear. Aldus Huxley and George Orwell convey fantasy in the form of mechanism. Their use of fantasy is an agent to project the present into the future. Both Huxley and Orwell visualize the shapes of things to come, the former the wholly mechanized world of the scientists and the latter the totalitarian state administered by the thought police. The method of both is distorting the proportions of the normal beings or things. Their fantasies are based on logic. They create imaginary worlds in which the attentions of the readers are suspended till the end. Their novels, however, have not attained that symbolic richness which Forster's novels have.

Forster's handling of fantasy is like that of a poet. He draws upon the classical study to create a new type of fantasy. He colors ordinary situations and places in such a unique way by his rich imaginative powers that they look extraordinary. As in Coleridge, so in Forster, the supernatural looks as natural and the natural as the supernatural, what is important in fantasy is the technique of presentation. Forster himself points out that the effect depends on the handling. He writes: ...all will depend on the handling. It is treated..., and the mythology is most important.¹³ Bonamy Dobree also believes in the mixing up of the natural and the unnatural in fantasy: In fantasy, we think, the supernatural ... basis from a stock-broker.¹⁴

It would not be out of place to point out that in his theory and practice of fantasy, Forster is mainly influenced by Samuel Butler. In his easy *A Book that Influenced Me* (1924), Forster shows his indebtedness to Butler and indicates that *Erewhon*, a serious book not written too seriously, influenced him most, because he found the ideas congenial, because it shows Butler as a master of that oblique, and because it makes use of fantasy. Forster writes: I like that idea of fantasy of muddling up ... and I have sometimes tried to do it when writing myself.¹⁵

Forster in his use of fantasy is also close to George Macdonald whose stories based on German folklore and philosophy is the instruments of release and redemption. But whereas in Macdonald the instruments of redemption are quasi-maternal figures - the Great Grandmother in *The Princess and the Goblin* (1873) and the wise woman in *The Lost Princess* (1875), in Forster's stories the hero seeks an escape, a flight to freedom, from them. He turns to a young male or brother-figure as his deliverer. Forster uses fantasy as a technique of revealing the inner hidden human experiences. His fantasy is not a technique of escape but a complex device of presenting the reality of the life and the society. His use of fantasy is mainly to enrich the symbolic aspects of the fiction and to add an allegorical dimension to it. His fantasy is like a boring machine that cuts across the layers of consciousness to reach the deeper and deeper springs of life.

In *The Story of a Panic* Leyland, the pseudo artist says that in the modern age. All the poetry is going from Nature, we see the vulgarity of desolation spreading.¹⁶ He further says: We are all hopelessly steeped in vulgarity that the woods no longer give shelter to Pan.¹⁷ The hollow-tree from which issues a clear stream assumes a great significance for Lucas in *The Road from Colonus* which is a short story. Sitting in it, Lucas undergoes a feeling of eternity. Everything assumes a new significance for him. The hollow of the tree is like a womb from which Lucas is reborn with a new wisdom. But its significance completely eludes his daughter, Ethel, who drags him back to the mundane world. Harold in *Albergo Empedocle* is so much possessed by the spirit of the place that, having fallen asleep in the ruins of Acragas, he wakes up convinced that he had lived there before. His men unfortunately do not understand him and he is declared insane. In *The Story of a Panic* the picnickers, sitting in a romantic valley, are so much over-awed by the spirit of the place, visualized as the cat's paw that they ran away in moral fear. Eustace, who envisages Pan, is liberated from the fetters of his guardians. Thus in the short stories and the novels of Forster the place works like a living spirit.

Forster also uses such characters who do not behave as the people of the earth. He transcends the physical world with the introduction of ordinary men into no man land, the future, the past, the interior of the earth, the fourth dimension.¹⁸ Ruth Wilcox has the wisdom of the past and Mrs. Moore attains the vision in the interior of the earth. Cave and Godbole's mysticism pen his fourth dimension. They have the same flesh and blood which ordinary people have, but it is due to their unique actions that they belong to no-man's-land. They transcend the boundaries of ordinary man's area. Gino to Lilia appears as a Pagan God when she sees him sitting on the rampart of Monteriano. She is enamored of him and marries him. Even when he falls from the grace of Lilia, he impresses the readers with an elemental passion for a child. To be a father is his greatest desire. And when Miss Abbott sees him caressing the child in his own way, she is overwhelmed by his deep passion. Miss Abbott also undergoes a transformation. Holding the baby of Gino, she appears to Philip as Virgin Marry. She also appears to him as the goddess of mercy when she nurses his broken hand and in the last scene, she appears to him as Endymion. Forster writes: Philip's eyes were fixed on the Campanile of Airolò. But and which was so tragic for him, remained supremely beautiful.¹⁹

Forster's stories are the best illustration of fantasy. The only novel where Forster makes an elaborate use of fantasy is *A Room with a View*. It would be worthwhile to point out the use of fantasy in his novel because it deals with fantasy and Forster's stories are also fantasies. It is in his short stories that one comes across a ruler and more varied use of fantasy. This circumstance of his life made it imperative for him to take recourse to fantasy to vent his feelings. The fantasy as a literary device has been used in different forms in different stories to facilitate his treatment of fantasy. All the twelve stories collected in *The Celestial Omnibus* and *The Eternal Moment*, as well as more than half of the stories in *The Life to Come* and other stories are characterized by the dominant element of fantasy. Forster calls all the stories written before the First World War fantasies. The muddling up, mixing up the boundaries of the imaginary and the real must have served the purpose of the young writer who could not have dared openly to deal with the themes which directly or indirectly touch on his personal problems. So fantasy to him is a useful device to reconcile the imaginary and the real, to present the situation of his life he could not have done in a direct way.

All these stories exist as vehicles of Forster's escape, or protest or a flight to freedom with the help of Pan, Faun, Dryads, Sirens and Celestial Omnibus, from the over-founding tormentors into the paradise of personal freedom. Wilfred Stone rightly points out that these stories record the first stage of protest or rebellion against school, church and the intolerable chaperonage of loving parents and guardian. As these stories were the token of his protest, the stronger the protest the more satisfying is the story. In this respect, *The Story of a Panic* is the best in this line. In fact, Forster's short stories are the inner exploration of his self or hidden experiences that have confronted with the outer life, the society of the world. In his novels he has not presented his inner hidden experiences. Moreover, these short stories provide him with materials which he elaborates in his novels. One cannot overlook these stories in order to have a complete understanding of E. M. Forster who is a great puzzling writer of the twentieth century.

Forster calls his stories fantasies. Indeed he has used it in its full form- Myth, people and place elaborately. Fantasy also suits his purpose to throw light on his temperament. Glen Cavalier observes: Fantasy is used by Forster as unction for disobedience, and by its means existence of a kind of imaginative over world to which he regularly returned. It was out of its elements that the novels were to grow.²⁰

With his characteristic ironical personal style, Forster has been able to explore his inner experiences, his self, through these fantasies, by using symbols and poetry in them, and by giving allegorical dimension to them. He also shows how this inner self confronts with the society of the world. Forster's message in *Howards End* is only connect. In his stories many of the characters, however, fail to make the connection because the demands of the outer and inner life can seldom be harmonized. But Forster must have been able to connect his inner hidden experiences of self with the outer life of the society of the world. Otherwise it would not have been possible for him to lead such a long life.

Conclusion

Forster uses fantasy as a technique more in his stories than in his novels. The muddling of the actual and the impossible sometimes leaves the average reader wondering, but a perceptive reader, acquainted with not too few uses of fantasy in English fiction, does not fail to grasp the real significance of the stories. And a unique advantage of the use of this technique in the stories is that it frees the writer from the obligation of representing the distasteful fact- from the tyranny of Victorian naturalism. *The Story of a Panic*, *Albergo Empedocle*, *The Other Side of the Hedge*, *Other Kingdom*, *The Curate's Friend*, *The Story of the Siren*, and *The Machine Stop*, embody severe criticism of existing ideas and institutions, but they remain good-humored stories as the satirized world seems distanced from the real world because of the dominating part of the supernatural or no-human in these stories. Some of the stories also read like spirited asides because of the poor representation of the external world. However, the technique of fantasy is not a tool of mere comic effect, its import is serious. In many of the tales fantasy is employed to assert the importance of freedom and passion. Eustace in *The Story of a Panic*, Miss Beaumont in *Other Kingdom*, Harold in *Albergo Empedocle*, Lucas in *The Road from Colonus*, Kuno in *The Machine Stop*, Vithobai in *The Life to Come*, Cocoonut in *The Other Boat*, the President in *What Does It Matter? A Morality* are somewhat liberated souls whom their comically inhibited people fail to comprehend. Thus the technique of fantasy puts the ridicule the dogmatism of attitude. Since fantasy undermines plausibility, it plays a minor part in Forster's novels which are more grounded in social realism than the tales. It may be pointed out here that in his use of fantasy Forster is closer to Swift of *Gulliver's Travels* and Butler of *Erewhon* than the writers of fantasies of his age. Compared with the stories of Machen and Saki, Forster's stories seem rather tame, but he writes with a deeper and more wide-ranging purpose. His stories are more recondite and multilayered. They are remarkable for their elusiveness and esotericism. His stories, though simple in language and mild in narration, are far from easy. Their thought content is often disturbing. Only Paw's fiction bears some resemblance with that of Forster in its unique fusion of myth and contemporary realism. Moreover fantasy serves the purpose of Forster who wants to explore the inner self of his characters of short stories.

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