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Only Connect?:

Complex Liberal Temperament in "Arthur Snatchfold"*

Yurie OCHI

Forster produced many novels which encourage people to break down barriers of social rank and racial differences as well as to try to cooperate with others. Not to mention the famous phrase *only connect* from *Howards End*, one of his posthumous works, *Maurice*, terminates with the escape of two men—"the breaking down of class barriers"—one of whom belongs to the middle class while the other is a man of the working class (Page 122). Notwithstanding Forster's praises of liberal humanism and his attempts to connect with *different* people, some contradictions can be observed in his works. Lionel Trilling criticizes the inconsistency and collision in Forster's writing and his liberalism.

> To this tradition Forster has long been committed— all his novels are politically and morally tendentious and always in the liberal direction. Yet he is deeply at odds with the liberal mind, and while liberal readers can go a long way with Forster, they can seldom go all the way. They can understand him when he attacks the manners and morals of the British middle class, . . . But sooner or later they begin to make reservations and draw back. . . . For all his ling commitment to the doctrines of liberalism, Forster is at war with the liberal imagination. (Trilling 7-8)

The clash between superficial themes and deeper meanings also occurs in "Arthur Snatchfold," a homoerotic short story. Superficially, Forster is indicating pain and predicament of homosexuals and criticizes the society's severe repression. However, as readers observe the story closely, some descriptions are at odds with Forster's liberalism. He seems to endorse social inequality, brutality of exploiting and treating the lower-class man as a scapegoat.

Forster finished writing "Arthur Snatchfold" in 1928, but the short story was kept as a secret from public until its posthumous publication in 1972. In many of Forster's homosexual stories the focus is on the relationship between two men who come from different cultural backgrounds. A missionary and a tribesman argue over religious interpretations in "The Life to Come." In "The Other Boat," racial differences and discriminations are at the core of the story,

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and “Torque” illustrates the interaction of two tribes. Meanwhile, *Maurice* deals with class differences. “Arthur Snatchfold” also follows this pattern of portraying cultural differences.[1] It pictures the relationship of two men from different classes. Conway, a rich businessman is staying in Trevor Donaldson’s hotel where he meets Arthur Snatchfold, a young boy who sells milk, and the two have a secret sexual affair. The incident is investigated later, and the young boy is arrested and jailed. Conway is not punished and escapes the fate of a convict. Although the milk-boy is given a chance to have his sentence reduced if he tells the authorities the name of his accomplice, he refuses. Conway is informed about the selfless act of the young boy from Donaldson, however, he is unsure of what further actions he should take. Instead of revealing that he was an accomplice, he writes Snatchfold’s name in a notebook.

“Arthur Snatchfold” has not been Forsterians’ main discussion and has not been researched meticulously. Stephen da Silva argues that Forster’s posthumously published homosexual works, including *The Life to Come* and *Maurice*, have a common theme—the connection between homosexuality and one’s childhood. He writes: “if normative culture equates homosexuality with childishness, these writings too associate realizing homosexual desire with moving back in time or returning to childhood” (250). Silva explores this pattern in *Maurice* and “The Other Boat”: the realisation of the characters’ sexuality is associated with the past, childhood years and the present are juxtaposed with homosexual desire and a tragic ending. Silva also applies this configuration in “Arthur Snatchfold.”

Wilfred Stone points out Forster’s aversion towards the lower classes: “the cruelty with which Forster treats the lower-class lovers, unabashedly using them as scapegoats” (396). According to Stone, Forster is “clearing himself and damning himself” by making Conway a disturbing character (398). Lane compares the story with *Maurice* and regards “Arthur Snatchfold” as “the realistic conclusion to *Maurice*’s sexual idealism” (178). Stephen Land categorizes the story’s characters into three types of characters, which includes “a hero (Conway), a group of repressive villains (the country magistrates, of whom Trevor Donaldson is the most prominent), and the challenger (Snatchfold)” (226). Land points out that the story connotes two key points which can be found in other of Forster’s works: the hero’s responsibility over the challenger’s anguish and the challenger’s sacrifice to save the hero. On the other hand, Levine’s attitude towards this story is a little different; he has a sympathetic attitude towards Conway. Conway is distressed by his “moral dilemma” and emphasizes that Conway’s decision is understandable: “He chooses the prudent course, and, I think, most

[1] All of the mentioned short stories were first published posthumously in *The Life to Come* (1972).

readers find his decision plausible if not commendable" (Levine 79). Athanasios Dimakis relates queer desires to a hotel and discusses that the hotel and its surroundings function as "Foucauldian Heterotopias" (4). Although many critics study "Arthur Snatchfold" from the viewpoint of class and inequality, the ambiguity of the interpretation should be at the core of the discussion. Thus, this paper explores the complexity of Forster's story by focusing on class and inequality.

In "Arthur Snatchfold," an early morning encounter between Conway and Snatchfold foregrounds the link between youthfulness and homosexuality. Aging Sir Richard Conway—Forster writes that he had "spruce gray head"—is hemmed in by his responsibilities as a heterosexual patriarch and businessman and is depressed by the dullness and sterility of the Donaldson's home (*LC* 79-80). But he is able to temporarily escape these restraints in his early-morning tryst with Arthur Snatchfold in the woods. Conway, who is an affluent old man, can get away with his social role and reveal his sexuality when meeting a mesmerized milk-boy:

> He looked at the dull costly garden. It improved. A man had come into it from the back of the yew hedge. . . . But the vision had departed, the sunlight stopped, the garden turned stodgy and green again, and the maid came in with his tea. She said, "I'm sorry to be late, we were waiting for the milk, sir." The man had not called him sir, and the omission flattered him. (*LC* 80)

Before the encounter with Snatchfold, the garden appears "dull" to Conway (*LC* 80). This embodies Conway's frustration at his social role as a privileged heterosexual man. After having met the young milk-boy, the garden is "improved" (*LC* 80). The omission of the honorific "sir" by Snatchfold frees Conway from society's burdens and liberates his closeted desire. The garden undergoes another transformation as Snatchfold disappears: it now seems grey. The maid's words make Conway realise he is confined in a brutally heteronormative society and cannot escape from it. Although it is evident in the novel that Snatchfold temporally releases Conway from his heteronormative role, it cannot be overlooked that the young milk-boy becomes a victim in the end while Conway escapes from punishment for the debauchery he has committed. Philip Kennicott explains this oddness and ingressiveness of the narrative:

> Forster's story is exceptional because only one man is punished, and he is given a voice – and a final, clear, unequivocal protest against the injustice. The other man escapes, but into shame, guilt, and self-recrimination. And yet it is the escapee who takes up the pen and begins to write. (215)

Conway receives liberation with Snatchfold, but Snatchfold is the one who is reproached for sodomy. The unjustness of society and the privilege of Sir Richard is emphasized in these passages.

The short story is written in a third-person narrative mode. The narrator mostly gives a detailed psychological portrait of Conway and sometimes, also of Trevor Donaldson: "Donaldson, the weaker man, felt tired and worried after [the talk]. He had not, to his knowledge, made a mistake, but he might have slipped unwittingly, and be poorer, and have to give up his county state" (*LC* 85). "Arthur Snatchfold" is mostly written from Conway's perspective, but the passage above is the only exception. The narrator reveals Donaldson's psychological description. Ironically, Arthur Snatchfold, whose name furnishes the title of this short story, is lacking a psychological description. His words are present in the novel, but the narrator conceals Snatchfold's inner feelings. Similarly, the psychologies of the maid and the waiter are cloaked in mystery, even though they speak in the narrative.

The inequality is observed since the narrative juxtaposes people in the middle class with those in the working class. Conway and Donaldson represent middle-class men, while Snatchfold, the maid, and the waiter represent the working class. Although they are given a voice in the short story, readers can only understand working-class people from the perspective of the middle-class men. The passage is written from one perspective, which disregards the outlook of the working classes. Like Bertha, the mad wife of Mr Rochester who is hidden in the attic and lacks psychological description in *Jane Eyre*, this short story is also fails to dwell into the psyche of the working classes. Dimakis notes that "Arthur Snatchfold" conceives class differences: "The story, indeed, seems to affirm an immutable class difference. The representative of the elite remains impervious and the lower-class individual is being ruthlessly scapegoated" (1). The class difference is most clearly observed from the juxtaposition of the two main characters. Conway and Snatchfold are described as the exact opposites in the story—Conway is an old businessman, who has recently accumulated riches, while Snatchfold is a poor village boy who makes ends meet by delivering milk (*LC* 79).

Snatchfold's speech and articulations indicate the difference of class between him and Conway. Their first interaction was provoked by "Hullo!" (*LC* 82). Forster's desire to express the Cockney dialect through such words as "Hullo" is evident and can also be observed in his *Howards End*: "He opened the door, and cried 'Hullo!' with the pseudo-geniality of the Cockney" (*HE* 36). Other characteristics of Cockney are represented in Snatchfold's words, such as dropping of spelling *h*. William Matthews explains the dropping-*h* in Cockney dialect:

"Finally, there is general agreement among Cockneys to neglect initial *h*, '*and*, '*Enery*, '*igh*, '*ope*, etc" (80). Snatchfold pronounces the word hotel as "'otel" (*LC* 83), and pronounces helped as "'elped" (*LC* 84). Moreover, in contrast to Snatchfold's casual English such as "You was" (*LC* 83) and "we was" (*LC* 84), Conway speaks formal English. Forster opts to make use of dialogues to portray the interaction between two people who belong to different classes instead of having the narrator to present these details.

Various binary oppositions can be observed throughout the short story. Conway spends a short period in Trevor Donaldson's hotel after having been asked to do so by the latter. During Conway's brief vacation Snatchfold continues to work from early morning till nearly midnight. Their roles are also different: Conway is being served and tended to by the likes of his maid and Snatchfold, while the young man is in the position of the server. The final point that needs to be noted is the differences between Conway's and Snatchfold's personalities—the former is depicted as a gloomy figure while the latter displays some childish behaviour.

The auto between the two gets elusive as the story proceeds. The inequalities are most evidently expressed when their secret affair comes to an end. After they partake in sexual intercourse, Conway persuades Snatchfold to take some of his money: "do take this and get yourself some trifle with it" (*LC* 84). Snatchfold at first refuses to accept the money: "I didn't do for that . . . we was each as bad the other. …. Naow… keep yer money" (*LC* 84). However, Conway forcefully hands the money to the milk-boy, which attests to Snatchfold's economic exploitation. The two men had agreed to have sexual intercourse before, and at first they seem to be on an equal footing. The action of receiving money turns Snatchfold from an ordinary milk-boy to a male prostitute and turns Conway into the man who bought the services of one. Even though Snatchfold tries to keep an equal status with Conway, his efforts are wasted. Levine defends Conway and points out that blaming Conway implicates neglecting the implication of Forster's criticism in society which are evident in his works: "To blame Conway-Forster because the English legal system has martyred a decent man like Snatchfold is to ignore the criticism of social values that Forster's story intends" (80). As already mentioned above, Conway's attitude towards Snatchfold is already domineering even before the latter is caught by the police. In conclusion, Conway's behaviour is incomprehensible considering his attitude towards Snatchfold. Here, it only implies the exploitation of a young working-class man by a rich, old man.

As this paper has already displayed, Conway's condescending attitude is observed throughout the narrative. Jeffrey Meyers makes a similar point: "Forster's repressed hero [Conway] is always condescending and patronizing, and the liaison with his inferior, no matter

how successful, is quite deliberately ephemeral" (110; emphasis in original). She thinks the connection between the working class and the middle class is ephemeral, since the text mentions that "The affair had been trivial and crude, and yet they both had behaved perfectly. They would never meet again, and they did not exchange names" (*LC* 85). Meyers concludes that Conway's attitude is "selfish cunning" (110) and is different from Snatchfold's thoughtful decision. However, it should be noted that Conway is represented as a privileged person.

While ultimately Conway escapes from being captured, the conversation between him and Donaldson baffles the reader who has been led to believe that the old man is a truly privileged, socially advantaged man. In the first part of the story, Conway belittles Mr and Mrs Donaldsons and thinks they are "his inferiors" since they "had not travelled or read or gone in for sport or love" (*LC* 79). In addition, while the conversation between Conway, Donaldson and Mr. Clarke, Conway regards that he is "the most intelligent of the three" (*LC* 81). Donaldson is depicted as "the weaker man", since he is "poorer" and naturally Conway is depicted as the stronger man (*LC* 85). However, their power balance becomes wobbly as Donaldson reveals the incident which took place in his hotel in the second part of the story. Their power dynamic is overturned the moment Conway hears that the incident was "between males" (*LC* 87) and asks Donaldson, "Black or white?" (*LC* 85). Conway is turning into a weaker figure. He overreacts to the court ruling regarding Snatchfold several times. For instance, he spills a few drops of brandy, and Donaldson becomes sceptical towards Conway: "But how ever did you guess he was on a round?" (*LC* 89). This consequence shows that Conway becomes weaker, and Donaldson becomes stronger. Conway is treated as a condescending man who gets away with sodomy thanks to his privilege, but this passage implies that Conway is also a victim of heterosexual society. Even though Conway is also being victimized through his conversation with Donaldson, it cannot be overlooked that the whole narrative is written from Conway's or Donaldson's point of view. Snatchfold's brave and hero-like behaviour can only be observed through Donaldson, while Conway is the one who writes Snatchfold's name at the end of the short story.

Forster's novels are not conclusive: Forster reveals the injustice of the heteronormative society and criticizes gay oppression by incarcerating the lower-class lover. At the same time, Forster endorses class inequality and his condescending attitude towards the lower classes is prevalent throughout his works. Sir Richard Conway takes advantage of the milk-boy Snatchfold to achieve homosexual gratification. Writing down Snatchfold's name upon hearing of the court ruling, is the only action that is taken by Conway. The narrative is written mainly from Conway's perspective, and the short story severely lacks the psychological descriptions

of the working class. Snatchfold's Cockney accent is juxtaposed with Conway's formal English to make their class differences stand out. While Snatchfold tries to maintain an equal status with Conway, the latter breaks his offer by giving him some money. Although the unfairness and exploitation of the working classes is revealed in the story, Forster reminds readers not to forget the fact that Conway is also a victim of the heteronormative society. The story can be interpreted in multiple ways, and it symbolizes the conflict of Forster's liberal imagination.

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