
Sexuality and Selfhood in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*

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Abstract: E. M. Forster's *Maurice* presents homosexuality as a process of becoming, shaped by social regulation, institutional discourse, class, desire, and resistance. Composed in 1913-14 but withheld from publication until after Forster died in 1971, the novel emerged from a culture that treated heterosexuality as the endpoint of male development and cast male same-sex desire as morally, socially, and medically deviant. This paper argues that Forster reworks this historical context into a narrative of shifting identity, tracing Maurice Hall's progression from ignorance and hegemonic masculinity to self-recognition and, ultimately, to a position beyond compulsory heterosexuality.

Drawing primarily on Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), the paper examines how sexuality is constructed through knowledge, surveillance, secrecy, and normalization. Analysis of Maurice's relationships with Clive Durham and Alec Scudder identifies two competing modes through which male desire is regulated: accommodation and resistance. The novel stages this tension as a story of social and sexual transformation, positioning homosexual subjectivity as an alternative mode of intimacy, agency, and belonging within, and against, the discourses that sought to contain it.

Keywords: *Maurice*; E. M. Forster; sexuality; selfhood; homosexual identity; queer theory; social regulation

E.M. Forster's *Maurice* is a distinctive work in the history of homosexual representation as it foregrounds self-recognition and emotional liberation within homosexual identity rather than emphasizing marginalization, silence, and social rejection. Written in

1913-14 and published only after he died in 1971, the novel falls between the conservative sex morality of Edwardian England and a later, more broadly accessible definition of homosexual identity. The novel's dedication to a "Happier Year" sets up its peculiar denial of the suffering and social exclusion of the homosexual subjects. Its historical significance therefore lies not only in portraying homosexuality but in picturing a future where same-sex desire could serve as a foundation for a viable way of living.

Representation and selfhood are the key to the present argument. *Maurice* does not present its protagonist as a pre-existing homosexual subject whose identity is merely concealed and awaiting discovery or disclosure. Rather, Maurice Hall's sexuality emerges through institutional, social, cultural, and intimate experience. In his early years, he is taught what a respectable man should be before he has the conceptual language to articulate who he wants to become. His encounters with Clive Durham and Alec Scudder progressively transform his initial uncertainty. Maurice's story is not simply about homosexual desire but about his gradual recognition of himself in contrast to the identity society expects him to adopt.

The argument that follows charts this evolution in four movements. The first situates Maurice within the disciplinary regime of Edwardian schooling, demonstrating how Michel Foucault's discourse of surveillance in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and Judith Butler's account of the repeated performance of heterosexual masculinity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) work together to construct the respectable English boy as a seemingly natural ideal. The second examines the epistemological void created by inadequate sexual education, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) to show how silence shapes Maurice's sense of self as much as instruction does. The third considers the historical and medical discourses: Foucault argues, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), that modern sexuality is produced through discourses of knowledge and power that classify and regulate sexual conduct; Halperin, in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays* (1990), emphasizes the historical contingency of sexual identities; and Sinfield, in *The Wilde Century* (1994), examines how cultural anxieties around effeminacy and scandal shaped understandings of same-sex desire. Together these perspectives trace how such desire is named, stigmatized, and pathologized. The final movement reads Maurice's relationships with Clive Durham and Alec Scudder as two different reactions to the same pressures: accommodating and resisting.

This process of education is established in the opening chapter. When Maurice leaves Mr. Abrahams's preparatory school, he is described as a "plump, pretty lad" (Forster 6), initially presenting him as an ordinary boy rather than as a marked or stigmatized subject. Yet the social structures surrounding him have already begun to shape his future. Maurice

recalls that Mr. Abrahams instructed him to “copy my father” (Forster 7). This seemingly simple instruction entails more than imitation; it requires Maurice to adopt his father as a model of respectable masculinity and, consequently, to internalize a socially prescribed identity.

When Maurice reminds himself that he is “never to do anything [that he would] be ‘ashamed to have mother see me do’” (7), the command is clearly disciplinary. The maternal gaze is envisioned and used to control behaviour. Before he develops a sense of his own wishes, Maurice is taught to watch himself and be guided by the standards of his family. Foucault shows, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), that punishment is not the only way of exercising disciplinary power; internalized surveillance is another. Being aware that one is always being observed, Maurice is taught to behave accordingly, and it is this surveillance that is tied to the production of a recognizable male subject.

In addition, the instruction to “copy” his father is an example of the fact that masculinity is not simply a natural state, but one that must be learned. Butler's (1990) notion of gender identity rests on the idea that identity is intelligible only as a series of repeated norms and performances. Maurice is thus taught to be a man: he has to embody the gestures, morals, class values, expectations, and heterosexual norms of respectable English manhood.

This process is made explicitly sexual in Mr. Ducie's lesson. He tells Maurice that he is “just becoming a man now” (Forster 8) and explains sexuality in terms of the “natural” contrast between “male and female.” His lesson presents heterosexuality as the expected path to masculinity: “To love a noble woman, to protect and serve her—this ... was the crown of life,” he says, concluding, “Male and female! Ah, wonderful!” (Forster 10). Mr. Ducie's language constructs heterosexuality as the natural and complete form of human sexuality. By bringing sexuality, morality, gender, and marriage into a single framework, his lesson turns heterosexuality into a social norm rather than simply a personal form of desire. Foucault argues, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), that sexuality does not just need to be put under repression; rather, it is created through discourses that help to shape the bodies and desires that can be known, classified, and regulated. Mr. Ducie's lesson is an instance of this productive function of discourse: he provides Maurice with a vocabulary for the reproduction of the heterosexual, but not for same-sex desire, and that omission matters more than what is actually said. Mr. Ducie tells Maurice what “male and female” means, but offers no corresponding vocabulary for male desire directed at another male. It is striking that Maurice is taught how sexuality should work, yet is given no language to understand his own desires. Reproduction is explained, marriage is presented as the norm, but homosexual desire remains unspoken.

Maurice's response exposes the inadequacy of this system: "I think I shall not marry" (Forster 10). This declaration should not be taken at face value as a conscious statement of homosexuality. Maurice doesn't yet say that he wants men; he simply recoils from the predictable heterosexual future that has been given to him. What makes this statement important is just this incompleteness: Maurice's resistance comes before his ability to name the identity he will be led to by that resistance. Mr. Ducie meets this challenge immediately by conceding that Maurice will eventually marry. His reply, "This day ten years hence I invite you and your wife to dinner" (Forster 10), reasserts heterosexuality as the expected future, as though Maurice's refusal had never occurred; within this social system, dissent is erased simply by refusing to treat it as significant.

Maurice's final judgement on Mr. Ducie's lesson is consequently crucial: "Liar," he thought, "Liar, coward, he's told me nothing" (Forster 10). The statement marks the first instance of epistemological resistance in the novel. Maurice realizes that the dominant discourse on sexuality cannot account for his own desires, so his problem is not just a lack of knowledge, but that discourse doesn't fit his experience. Sedgwick (1990) argues that sexual identities are constituted by what can be spoken, what must be unspoken, and whose language is unavailable to them, and this is reflected in Maurice's answer to Mr. Ducie: he senses that something is missing, though he cannot yet name it.

The novel then indirectly offers this missing language in dreams. In Maurice's dream at Sunnington, the gardener, George, shows up naked in front of him. The second dream is less specific but more emotionally revealing, when Maurice hears a voice say "That is your friend," and is filled with "beauty" and "tenderness" (Forster 17). The dreams matter because they offer another way of knowing: what is not said in the language of sex crosses over into the unconscious imagination. This second dream is significant since Forster does not introduce Maurice to homosexuality directly; instead, desire is manifested through friendship, beauty, tenderness, and sacrifice. Maurice can visualize two men being "in love with each other, making any sacrifice" (Forster 17). The language is ambiguous, but the emotional framework it establishes anticipates the sexual and affective relationships that will shape him later, making the dream an alternative epistemology, a discourse of the unconscious that registers what has not yet been spoken.

Jeffrey Weeks, in *Sex, Politics and Society* (1989), situates sexuality within social institutions, morality, class, medicine, and political power. Maurice's struggle to understand himself is therefore not purely private, as the culture around him already attaches moral and social meanings to sexuality. Similarly, Halperin (1990) cautions against treating "homosexuality" as a timeless category: Maurice's experience occurs before the emergence

of a clearly defined modern gay identity, so that when he tries to name his sexuality, he encounters a language already shaped by medicine, religion, and cultural scandal.

When Maurice finally admits himself to be “an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort” (Forster 154), Forster makes this historical burden clear. The phrase is significant because Maurice can only use it as a self-description through the name of another man whose public disgrace has become a stigma attached to homosexual identity. The word “unspeakable” creates a double bind, labelling a tabooed group while suggesting that respectable society cannot openly speak of it. Sinfield (1994) offers a useful lens here: Wilde's trials made his name synonymous with homosexuality, scandal, and effeminacy, and Maurice's reference to Wilde reflects this, since he cannot name his desire directly and can only understand it through Wilde's stigmatized image.

The visit to Dr. Barry extends this process. Having recognized his desire as a problem to be corrected, Maurice asks for assistance. Dr. Barry refuses: “Now listen to me, Maurice, never let that evil hallucination, that temptation from the devil, occur to you again” (Forster 154). This language reveals the overlapping jurisdictions of science and religion. Rather than offering a scientific explanation, Dr. Barry recasts homosexual desire as an “evil hallucination” and a “temptation from the devil,” so that the very speech meant to diagnose Maurice is what pathologizes him. Foucault's (1978) account of the link between knowledge and power is pertinent here: Dr. Barry does not simply dismiss Maurice but constructs a version of him that is diseased and in need of correction, transforming sexuality into medicalized knowledge and Maurice into a subject of institutional power.

Sexual transgression cannot be examined apart from wider structures of authority, as Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991) helps illuminate; the conflict Maurice faces unfolds not between personal desire and personal ethics but between desire and the institutions that determine which desires are permitted to be legitimate. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) adds a further dimension: Maurice's identity is classed as much as it is sexed, and his expected future of education, respectability, and marriage within England's middle and upper classes treats homosexuality as incompatible with respectable manhood.

Significantly, Clive Durham enters Maurice's life at this point, introducing him to an alternative vocabulary for same-sex desire through Plato's Symposium: when Clive asks, “You've read the Symposium?” and introduces Maurice to Greek models of male love, “a breath of liberty touched him” (Forster 46). This shift toward Greek models is not incidental. Robert K. Martin, in “Edward Carpenter and the Double Structure of Maurice” (1983), examines the novel's engagement with Carpenter's ideas and the alternative models of homosexuality available to Forster, while Howard Booth, in his chapter on Maurice in *The*

Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster (2007), similarly situates the novel within the historical and sexual culture that produced it, reflecting a broader critical focus on how the novel constructs Maurice's sexuality and capacity for change.

Clive's "breath of liberty," then, is not a private fantasy but a historically grounded alternative staged against the institutional voices that have already tried to define Maurice's desire for him. But Clive's role is deliberately ambivalent: he offers Maurice a language of recognition, only to settle for conformity himself. His later declaration, "Against my will I have become normal. I cannot help it" (Forster 111), reveals the strength of social normalization; Clive's "normality" is not framed as a personal epiphany but as a social transformation enacted through marriage, class expectation, inheritance, and the pull of respectability. This makes Clive an essential counterpoint to Maurice: both men recognize homosexual desire and face the same institutional pressures, but where Clive ultimately submits to the social order, Maurice eventually refuses it, and this divergence constitutes one of the novel's central narratives of change.

David Medalie's (2017) discussion of Forster, Maurice, and the "social fabric" is pertinent here, underscoring how consistently the novel ties personal identity to social structure. With the appearance of Alec Scudder, the novel's concern shifts from sexual recognition to sexual self-determination. The difference between Alec and Clive lies not merely in Alec's greater openness to physical intimacy but in the fact that the relationship is class-based: Maurice's friendship with Clive unfolds within the sheltered world of Cambridge, while his relationship with Alec disrupts that world entirely, so that sexual transgression becomes inseparable from class transgression.

This transformation is evident when Maurice and Alec come to understand themselves as a "casual refuge" from their "enemies," a bond marked by toughness and tenderness (Forster 198). The language matters because their relationship is imagined as a space created outside the dominant social order, so that their intimacy becomes a refuge precisely because it is not sanctioned by wider society. Forster does not portray this liberation as easy, however: the possibility of exposure has seeped into Maurice's mind, and he suspects that Alec may be a potential blackmailer, so that his fear, his secret, and his class difference remain in tension with his eventual trust.

The movement from suspicion to intimacy marks the final stage of Maurice's transformation: he first fears Alec, then recognizes desire, and finally recognizes the possibility of a shared life, so that the novel's narrative of change becomes fully political as Maurice begins to question the social conventions that have limited his sense of what could make him happy. The novel's positive conclusion must be read in this light: Forster is not offering a simple romantic resolution but staging a cultural intervention that refuses to treat

isolation, blackmail, social ruin, and death as the inevitable fate of gay men, so that the prospect of Maurice and Alec building a life together marks a transformation not only in Maurice's identity but in the possibilities available to the narrative of homosexual identity itself.

Conclusion

This separation of Maurice from the script laid out for him is central to the paper's argument. The novel does not simply depict a gay man's suffering; it insists on the reality and legitimacy of his desire and traces what happens when that desire refuses to conform to a story already written for it. Maurice was taught that "male and female" represented the natural order, that he should model himself on his father, and that marriage was his inevitable future. When this script failed to account for his own desire, he was met not with understanding but with pathologization, first through Dr. Barry's "evil hallucination" and then through the inherited, stigmatized language of Wilde. Maurice ultimately refuses this script.

The movement from "I think I shall not marry" to a shared life with Alec is neither quick nor easy; it is the slow construction of a self-outside heterosexuality. This is precisely what makes Maurice's story a narrative of change: it tracks the transformation of homosexual identity from something nameless, to something pathologized and diagnosed, to something that can finally serve as the foundation for a livable life.

This paper has argued that Forster's central intervention shifts sexuality from a category of social regulation into a resource for selfhood. Foucault's account of institutions as producers of sexual subjects, Butler's theory of gender as repeated performance, and Sedgwick's attention to the politics of knowledge and silence together explain how Maurice is shaped by forces outside his control. Weeks situates this regulation within broader social institutions, while Halperin cautions against treating "homosexuality" as a stable, transhistorical category, a caution borne out by Maurice's own struggle to find language for his desire. Sinfield's account of Wilde's cultural legacy explains the specific, stigmatized vocabulary that becomes available to Maurice; Bourdieu's attention to class illuminates why respectability and desire come into conflict; and Dollimore's account of sexual dissidence clarifies why this conflict is never merely personal but always institutional and political.

Taken together, these frameworks demonstrate that Maurice's development is not simply psychological or sexual but social, historical, embodied, and political. The novel's final achievement, then, is not only that Maurice falls in love; it is that he discovers, and claims, a self he had once believed impossible.

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