"Facing the Sunshine": Nature and (Social) Environment in E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*

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Abstract
The relationship between nature and humans has been widely explored in literature. Spirituality, through which both human individuals and nature are connected, is the core concept in British and American transcendentalism, whose ideas permeate E.M. Forster's novel *A Room with a View* (1908). Forster's stance on nature and its role in the life of humans is striking in this narrative and enables multiple interpretations that are relevant today when eco-awareness is one of humanity's key goals. This article examines the intricate relationship between nature and humans that Forster establishes via both the narrative structure and the characters, and argues that it is through the depictions of nature and the environment that the author celebrates individualism and diversity. Yet it is also with the help of overt comparisons and parallelism of environmental fluctuations with the events that happen in the lives of the main characters that Forster introduces a unique ecological philosophy, underlining the inseparability of humans from nature and vice versa, thus expressing both humility and rapture with regard to the created symbiosis, its beauty and inscrutability.

Keywords: nature, environment, transcendentalism, individualism, diversity, E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View*

Introduction

The relationship between nature and humans has been widely explored in literature. Spirituality, through which both human individuals and nature are connected, is the core concept of transcendentalism, whose ideas entwine with those expressed by E.M. Forster in *A Room with a View* (1908). Forster's view on nature and its role in the life of humans is striking in this narrative and enables multiple interpretations that are relevant especially today when eco-awareness finally turns into one of humanity's key goals. This article examines the intricate relationship between nature and humans that Forster establishes via both the narrative structure and the characters, and argues that it is through the depictions of nature and the environment that the author celebrates individualism and diversity. Yet it is also with the help of overt comparisons and parallelisms of environmental fluctuations with the events that happen in the lives of the main characters that Forster introduces a unique ecological philosophy, underlining the inseparability of humans from nature and vice versa, thus expressing both humility and rapture towards the created symbiosis, its beauty and inscrutability.

Social Environment and Nature

Numerous scholars study Forster's works in light of postcolonial theory, queer theory, and eco-criticism. Perhaps the most recent prominent examples here include Robert K. Martin and George Piggford's 1997 edited collection *Queer Forster*, Elsa Cavalie and Laurent Mellet's 2017 edited collection *Only Connect: E.M. Forster's Legacies in British Fiction*, Francesca Pierini's "Such is the Working of the Southern Mind: A Postcolonial Reading of E.M. Forster's Italian Narratives" (2017–18), as well as Krzysztof Fordoński's essays on Forster, including "E.M. Forster and the English Ways of Ex(Sup)ressing Emotions" (2016). These scholarly works explore the complexity of Forster's oeuvre and his contribution to literary studies in general and queer studies, English studies, and postcolonial studies in particular. I, in turn, want to contribute to the existing research by examining Forster's contribution to the formation of the meaning of the environment and propose a reading one of his works – the novel *A Room with a View* (1908) – as a work of eco-fiction. Interpreting *A Room with a View* as an example of eco-fiction, I rely on Mike Vasey's definition of the term as

> stories set in fictional landscapes that capture the essence of natural ecosystems [...]. [They] can build around human relationships to these ecosystems or leave out humans altogether. The story itself, however, takes the reader into the natural world and brings it alive [...]. Ideally the landscape and ecosystems – whether fantasy or real – should be as 'realistic' as possible and plot constraints should accord with ecological principles. (qtd. in Dwyer 2010, 3)

But I also consider Patrick D. Murphy's ideas on "nature oriented literature" and "environmental literature" and the power of such writings "to propel people back into the rest of nature with new perspectives and frames of reference" (qtd. in Dwyer 2010, 4).

From his first novel *Where Angels Fear to Trend* (1905) to the posthumously-published *Maurice* (1971), Forster's aim was always to reflect the most profound social, cultural, and political tensions in his works. The concept of the environment thus was never foreign to him, yet the meaning in which Forster used it should be deprived of any ambiguity. Forster discussed social and political environments within which such issues as class difference, intolerance, and many others were engendered. Nevertheless, as a close reading of *A Room with a View* reveals, the writer was also interested in the ecological environment and the role and place of nature in the human world. In this novel, Forster demonstrates how humans and nature co-exist constructing a unified ecosystem. The transformations in the characters' lives are tightly connected to the alternation of seasons, whereas the actions of the characters always mirror weather changes. The multiple social pressures that the characters experience throughout the novel are introduced to reveal the only true way of living, i.e., being honest to oneself and accepting nature as an integral part of one's being.

Through the novel's rather uncomplicated plot, Forster explores the social issues that were current during the Edwardian era; yet, as this article argues, one of the ways in which Forster explores these issues is an investigation of nature. The novel abounds in the images of nature that are used to describe surroundings, moods of the characters, as well as the problems and inner struggles that they experience. Forster's social critique of gender and class boundaries that many English people faced at the beginning of the twentieth century becomes successful and particularly vivid thanks, also, to the numerous references to the images of nature.

One of the earlier scenes in Florence is described as follows:

> Evening approached while they chatted; the air became brighter; the colours on the trees and hills were purified, and the Arno lost its muddy solidity and began to twinkle.

> There were a few streaks of bluish-green among the clouds, a few patches of watery light upon the earth, and then the dripping façade of San Miniato shone brilliantly in the declining sun. (Forster 2012, 39)

Forster's close attention to details is striking; the changes that happen to the place as the day comes to its end are described in a purely artistic manner, reviving the images of colorful paintings. The accuracy of an artist in depicting nature is noticeable throughout the whole novel, as the descriptions like the one above are the rule rather than an exception for *A Room with a View*. John Colmer calls *A Room with a View* "Forster's *sunniest* novel" (1975, 43; emphasis added). The epithet used by the scholar aptly reflects the dominant role that nature plays in the narrative. The "interplay between character and environment" that characterizes the novel from the beginning to its end helps "oppos[e]" not only the two geographical spaces of England and Italy but also the rights of individual freedoms and the wrongs of social oppression (Edwards 2002, 42, 47).

Mr. Emerson, the father of George, whose name clearly alludes to the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, accentuates the power of nature and the connection of every individual to it, stating that "[w]e know that we come from the winds, and that we shall return to them" (Forster 2012, 28). Forster's goal to demonstrate the unity of nature and human beings is, however, achieved not only through the recognition of the physical bond that exists between the two, for humans are part of the natural world, but also through the establishment of a spiritual bond. The latter is done through the descriptions of weather fluctuations and alternations of seasons. To specify, Forster seems to insist that human nature in its pure form can be compared to spring, i.e., it is fresh, ageless, promising, and beautiful. That is the reason for the multiple references to spring in the novel. For example, the British clergyman Mr. Eager wonders: "'Do you suppose there's any difference between spring in nature and spring in man? But there we go, praising the one and condemning the other as improper, ashamed that the same laws work eternally through both'" (66). Later, as Lucy finds herself in the pleasant company of an Italian driver, "[f]or the first time she felt the influence of spring" (69), which here stands both for a specific season as the characters are surrounded by blue violets but also for the inner peace and satisfaction, for "[i]n the company of this common man the world was beautiful and direct" (69). It also, quite evidently, stands for an awakening of the senses, for the atmosphere of spring encourages and inspires George to kiss Lucy.

After George kisses Lucy – the action witnessed by Lucy's cousin – Forster intensifies the conflict that is about to happen not only through the development of the plot but also

through the descriptions of nature that here serve as a peculiar narrative tool. Thus the reader is informed of the cold that the characters feel which signifies "the swift approach of bad weather" (71). The coming "storm" (74) is forecast due to the emergence of "all these clouds, all this immense electrical display" (72). Lucy's sad mood is echoed by the gloomy atmosphere created by the stormy weather, and the talk between Lucy and her cousin is preceded by a longer description of the setting:

> The rain was streaming down the black windows, and the great room felt damp and chilly. One candle burned trembling on the chest of drawers close to Miss Bartlett's toque, which cast monstrous and fantastic shadows on the bolted door. A tram roared by in the dark, and Lucy felt unaccountably sad, though she had long since dried her eyes. She lifted them to the ceiling, where the griffins and bassoons were colourless and vague, the very ghosts of joy. (76)

Through the rain, Forster depicts the inner concerns experienced by the characters. Lucy is not aware of her feelings for George, she has not realized them yet, and she is scared of them, therefore, her torment mainly comes from scarce self-knowledge, from not knowing her desires and not knowing how to articulate them, accept them, and act upon them in spite of social conventions. By fully concurring to the denial of her own feelings, Lucy gets in a muddle mostly by herself. Charlotte is concerned for Lucy and adopts the categories that are available to her; therefore, she thinks that all men are dishonest, mostly because she has not experienced relationships. Charlotte wants Lucy to be happy, only it will take her time to realize what this means. Once she understands, after she listens to George's declaration of love to Lucy, she will realize something new, and she will "push" Lucy towards George by making Lucy's last encounter with old Mr. Emerson possible. Curiously, in *The Shaping of the Double Vision: The Symbolic Systems of the Italian Novels of Edward Morgan Forster*, Fordoński views references to nature like the one to the rain as a form of "symbolism" that helps "create a music-like effect" – the so-called "rhythms":

> Any object [...], animal [...], plant [...], or natural phenomenon (rainstorm, light, darkness) may be used to form such rhythms thus attaining the symbolic quality by its place within the structure of the text rather than by some inherent qualities which could be defined as 'symbolic'. (2005, 12)

Nature – and various natural events, including the rain described in this scene – becomes both a place to situate the characters and an instrument through which to define the characters' actions, behaviors, and feelings.

Even Cecil, a rather tedious character in the novel, admits that we should appreciate nature and upon the return to England meditates upon the grandiosity of the environment: "Nature – simplest of topics, he thought – lay around them. He praised the pine-woods, the deep lakes of bracken, the crimson leaves that spotted the hurt-bushes, the serviceable beauty of the turnpike road" (104). Cecil confesses that he likes both the urbanism of London and the rural beauty of its suburbia and adds: "After all, I do believe that birds and trees and the sky are the most wonderful things in life, and that the people who live amongst them must be the best" (104). It is striking that Lucy phrases her opinion about nature in exactly the same words: "Nature – simplest of topics, she thought – was around them" (110). Forster uses Cecil and Lucy's remarks on nature to trace a deep divide between the two characters. Lucy is sincere in her appreciation of nature; Cecil is, as usual, trying to overcome his snobbishness with very poor results. He is trying to convince himself of the fact that Lucy does not live among ignorant people, who have seen too much of nature and too little of the urban world. He is trying to get close to Lucy, to come across as someone who is capable of appreciating simple values. Forster is making the point that there are people (like Cecil) so affected by posturing and social conventions that they cannot genuinely or directly appreciate what nature has to offer. The author draws the connections between Lucy and nature, on the one hand, and Cecil and nature, on the other. While the two characters are very different, the idea of the human being part of nature – irrespective of his/her behavior and actions – is indubitable to Forster.

The three seasons are distinctly present in the novel only to reinforce the changes in the lives of the main characters, and especially Lucy. The focus on the three (and not four) seasons is a telling choice: Forster follows the pattern of Greek (Mediterranean) year with three seasons only, treating autumn and winter as one season. *A Room with a View* starts in spring and the plot develops through summer and autumn. Along with the references to spring that were mentioned earlier, Forster provides his readers with multiple introductions to new seasons. First, "It was a Saturday afternoon, gay and brilliant after abundant rains, and the spirit of youth dwelt in it, though the season was now autumn. All that was gracious triumphed" (129). Second, "She [Lucy] obeyed, but loitered disconsolately at the landing window. It faced north, so there was little view, and no view of the sky. Now, as in the winter, the pine trees hung close to her eyes. One

connected the landing window with depression" (142). Third, "But Lucy had developed since the spring" (169). And finally:

> But, once in the open air, she paused. Some emotion – pity, terror, love, but the emotion was strong – seized her, and she was aware of autumn. Summer was ending, and the evening brought her odours of decay, the more pathetic because they were reminiscent of spring. That something or other mattered intellectually? A leaf, violently agitated, danced past her, while other leaves lay motionless. That the earth was hastening to re-enter darkness, and the shadows of those trees to creep over Windy Corner? (176)

The cyclicity that Forster reminds his readers about reinforces the complexity of human nature and the beauty that each individual bears in him/herself.

The appeal to appreciate nature is heard multiple times in the novel. From "'Listen to the wind among the pines! Yours is a glorious country'" (132) to the claims concerning "the wonder of the water" (136) and Lucy's "salut[ing] the dear view and the dear garden in the foreground, and above them, scarce conceivable elsewhere, the dear sun" (156) to George's meditations on "kindness" and "light" (158) and the appeal "Choose a place where you won't do harm – yes, choose a place where you won't do very much harm, and stand in it for all you are worth, facing the sunshine" (159). Forster's novel largely foregrounds the fact that underappreciating nature is a terrible sin. Moreover, the writer draws parallels between humanity's careless attitude to nature (and, generally, the idea of taking the healthy environment for granted) and the existing social problems, among them are gender and class inequalities.

E.M. Forster's Eco-Philosophy

What fascinates the reader the most is, indeed, not Forster's peculiar way of describing nature but rather his application of the images of nature in the discussions of the social environment. Judith Scherer Herz notices that the theme of love is central in Forster's writing:

> Love is clearly the key word for Forster. More than any other, it binds together his writing, makes it a body, filled with a vital substance, both passionate and spiritual. Love is theory, love is practice, and sometimes in the fiction, it is difficult to distinguish

> between them. Love creates, love, indeed, *is* the beloved republic, but even as abstraction, as idea, is [*sic*] speaks of the experience of touch, the contradictions of desire, the need to connect. (1978, 254; emphasis in original)

Yet while love in *A Room with a View* is an important concept through which one can examine the relationship between different characters, it is also through the theme of love that Forster conveys his views on the social and natural environments. To borrow from Jeffrey Heath, "One of Forster's principal touchstones is the everyday world, experienced directly and with love. This world includes nature and its daily cycles (the roaring Arno and the untempered sun), as well as the ordinary domain of furniture, bones, [etc.]" (1994, 404–05). Love to oneself and to one's surroundings that includes both people and places is but the key philosophy entwined in *A Room with a View*. In my ecocritical reading of the novel, however, I define this philosophy as *eco-philosophy*, for I see intricate and tight connections between Forster's treatment of the social environment and the natural environment. Essentially, the social is part of the natural; various social issues that are foregrounded in the novel, including inequality, are, in principle, the result of humanity's careless attitude to nature. Not noticing and appreciating nature as a unique and vital part of our (social and natural) environment is the result of an anthropocentric existence – the kind of existence that Forster is aware of (for the human does matter) but heavily condemns (for the centrality of the human undermines the significance of nature, as well as leads to an establishment of a hierarchy within the human world as such, making some humans, or human traits, more valuable and acceptable than other). Energetically exploring the so-called nature-culture divide, *A Room with a View* refutes the "hierarchy of culture over nature" (Giblett 2014, 21). Forster makes the point that humans must accept, respect, and appreciate their most natural and less contrived aspects. Forster's eco-philosophy thus suggests that the social can be approached through the natural.

An environmental/ecological approach to the human is particularly valuable in Forster's explorations of such issues as identity, gender, and sexuality. *A Room with a View* is classified as one of Forster's novels that "offer women and men suffering from the pathologies of middle-class Englishness a passage to nature, passion, and freedom" (Peppis 2007, 47). This escape to nature is not only a way to protest against, or temporarily forget about, the dominant patriarchal norms and expectations but also an opportunity to discover one's own true self. Certainly, homosexuality is one such issue that Forster examines and legitimizes through nature. To specify,

> Forster essentializes the "greenwood" as a homosexual version of what Harry Berger Jr. calls the "second world." Modelled upon the material ("first") world, yet employing the artistic imagination in order to improve upon it, Forster's "second world" offers a critique of mainstream sexual practices and values read through the lens of ecocriticism. (Christie 2005, 2)

In that way, Forster demonstrates "how aesthetics can become a decisive force for or against environmental change" (Buell qtd. in Christie 2005, 2). For Forster, thus, as portrayed in *A Room with a View*, the human and nature do not simply exist in close proximity, they *are* an integrated whole. As Forster explores the characters' struggles to withstand certain norms, define who they are, and identify their places in the social environment that they construct and inhabit, he uses Nature as a prism through which to define humanity. In her analysis of Forster's oeuvre, Kelly Sultzbach makes a pivotal observation: "the ecocentric foundations of his [Forster's] ideals productively complicate the very definition of what it means to be human" (2016, 25). To specify, "what it means to be human is only realized by confronting what it means to be a creature in a larger environmental habitat that informs so-called essential human qualities" (Sultzbach 2016, 25). Co-existence of humans with/within/in Nature is thus crucial to the very meaning of 'being human'. This is what constructs Forster's eco-philosophy as an ideology to understand and explicate the human, the (natural and social) environment, and the tight and complex relationship between the two.

Certainly, the novel's understanding of the world is not purely positive, it is rather the *potential* for being positive, almost sublime, that Forster calls us to discover. This is most vividly done through the character of Lucy who, according to Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, "must find her true self by learning to read the depths of her soul and then must strive to make that true self a lived reality, shedding her false self" (2010, 73), the transformation that Michael L. Ross terms as "a lengthy and often backtracking journey away from 'darkness' and into the 'light'" (1980, 155). This "journey" is evidently necessary not only for Lucy but for each and every character in the novel, and each of these transformations is marked by Forster by the descriptions of nature, which guides the readers through the changing world of the protagonists. Obviously, only a few of them are able to change: some remain blind to the possibility of change (Cecil), others are afraid to change (Charlotte). However, Forster does not attempt to envision an idyllic world, where a transformation is an easy process. On the contrary, he imagines both the success and the failure as integral parts of such a process. Herz has already noticed

that "[t]he descriptions of place are closely aligned to the development of the characters" (2007, 145), yet I would like to develop this observation further and argue that *A Room with a View* demonstrates that it is only when noticing and realizing natural changes within the ecological environment that humans are capable to fully cognize human nature as individual, changing, and sacred.

The oppression of human individuality that Forster argues strongly against is viewed as the darkest of human vices as can be observed in multiple scenes. Interpreting the title of the novel, Ross contends that "sight itself functions as a controlling metaphor," and adds that "one major way in which Charlotte imposes her repressive will on Lucy is by blocking her field of vision" (157). Here the scholar refers to the example of the "naked human body" that is perceived by Charlotte as "something that must be clothed" (157). Yet this is the view that Forster does not support, as he arguably speaks through the character of Mr. Emerson for whom "[a] 'renaissance' [...] involves a return to the body a simple being or presence in the world outside of any typological interpretation, and the fullest living of the body in a life of love among other humans. For him [for Mr. Emerson], each human should be equally capable of living this way in freedom" (Hinojosa 2010, 82).

The divinity of nature is underlined in the talk between Mr. Beebe and Mr. Emerson, as the latter discusses the Garden of Eden. While the talk is largely devoted to the existing gender inequality, it also touches upon the role of nature in the issue, for Mr. Emerson claims that "'[w]e shall enter it [the Garden of Eden] when we no longer despise our bodies'" (131). Mr. Emerson continues: "'I believed in a return to Nature once. But how can we return to Nature when we have never been with her? Today, I believe that we must discover Nature. After many conquests we shall attain simplicity. It is our heritage" (131). This observation underscores Forster's belief in the divinity of every individual irrespective of their gender, sexual orientation, and other possible characteristics that distinguish one human from another, accentuating diversity and individual uniqueness.

The scene when George, Fred, and Mr. Beebe swim naked in a pond and then happily run through the woods is symbolic in many ways, too. According to Colmer, it "acts as a baptism into brotherhood" (50), "serves its function of establishing the value of naturalness and spontaneous joy," while "the essence of its eroticism is homosexual" (51). Forster doubtlessly raises the questions of gender and homosexuality in this episode, yet what is even more important is that he, indeed, foregrounds the pricelessness of being natural and true to one's self. And while the novel "explores the importance of telling the truth in a variety of ways," the central way is the one termed by Colmer as "Forster's idea

of honesty" that "implies an antithesis between the self and society" (49). The generated "conflict between naturalness and conventionality" (44) that is typical not only of Lucy but also of all the other characters in the novel is the one that is to be solved by these characters both on individual and collective levels. And in this regard, the "isolation from one another" (Herz 1978, 258) that can be noticed in the relations between and actions of the characters should not be viewed as a disadvantage of the plot but rather as a way to achieve the transcendental unity between self and naturalness. An observation made by Hinojosa expands this theory:

> In *A Room with a View*, Forster ridicules and makes fun of typological ethics while providing a new "aesthetic" moral view in which a renaissance or reuniting of one's true self somehow naturally (yet vaguely) leads to a moral life of egalitarianism and love. To achieve this, all conventional and transcendental notions of characterization and morality have to be discarded. In this way, although Forster does not explore the consciousness and inner workings of his characters' psyches as his modernist contemporaries did, his reworkings and inversion of the metaphysics and morality of Puritan typological hermeneutics points to a very modernist view of morality and the individual self. (2010, 84)

Through his eco-philosophy, Forster not only establishes environmental awareness that remains actual today, but he also foregrounds equality as the core principle of human existence. The author's views on existentialism, environmentalism, feminism, and diversity that are deeply rooted in his worshiping of nature celebrate every human as a unique creation of nature.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between humans and nature that is meticulously explored in *A Room with a View* is key to one's understanding of Forster's philosophy of gender, ecology, and equality. This purely environmental narrative tackles a wide array of problems that British society faced at the beginning of the twentieth century. Scrutinizing the issues of class and gender, Forster inevitably turns to the profound questions of identity, transformation, and even age. Heavily criticizing such a concept as norm, Forster invites the readers to consider human uniqueness and individuality. It is through his detailed

explorations of the role of nature in our lives that Forster succeeds to foreground the importance of establishing diversity as a guideline for the social order.

Forster's transcendental views on collaboration between and unification of humans and nature are hardly novel, yet the author's treatment of the problem deserves to be assessed as masterly. Attempting to demonstrate that just as nature has its cycles (every day is different from the previous one; spring, summer, and autumn are all beautiful but distinctly different seasons), so is every human unlike another one. Through his discussions of these similarities between organization of the natural and human worlds, Forster skillfully crafts his eco-philosophy, according to which, only when recognizing nature as a perpetually transforming, yet beautiful and sublime force, one will be able to recognize the true value of a human being.

Forster's views on nature as profoundly complex, majestic, but also caring and life-giving are particularly significant today, in the twenty-first century, when the problem of climate change that humanity faces forces us to revisit the concepts of nature and the environment, understand their cultural value that was widely established in literature by multiple authors, among them is Forster. The ideas of appreciation of nature and human responsibility for it foreground the issue of preservation – the important aspect that balances the existence of humanity within the natural world that has evidently been ignored for the time long enough to provoke anthropogenic climate change. Forster's *A Room with a View* is, in this regard, a manifesto for all of us as we tend to take nature and the comforts it provides us with for granted, forgetting about the fragility of the natural world and the environment.

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