

Writing is a creative endeavor, and Brooke-Rose is not the first to describe it in sexual terms. She does, however, stress it throughout the text, in addition to providing both a male and a female narrator for the novel. The "winedark sea of infratextuality" (p. 106) recurs some fifteen pages later as the "wine dark sea of infrasexuality" (pp. 120-21). Plagiarism is described as a form of false "paternity" (p. 49). Linguistics is defined in terms of sexual relationships, "the double standard" for male and female adultery, she tells us, "is useful even in semiotics" (p. 83). There are several references to "heterotextuality" (pp. 67, 102), a term that seems perfectly coined to describe the fictional creation of this piece of fiction. *Thru* is a generative textasy.

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Theme and Myth in E. M. Forster's *The Life to Come*

Ten of the 14 short stories in E. M. Forster's posthumously published collection, *The Life to Come*, deal in one way or another with love between males. They vary widely in tone and setting, from the Ruritanian farce of "What Does It Matter?" to the grim realism of "The Other Boat," from the English domesticity of "Arthur Snatchfold" to the exotic locale of "The Life to Come." What binds all these stories together is the basic myth or fable which underlies them, and which seems to have recurred often to Forster's mind throughout the five or more decades of their creation. We wish here to explore that myth and some of its implications for Forster's view of life, as he saw it in the perspective of homosexuality, and to explore his attitudes toward the possibilities and qualities of homosexual relationships.

The myth may be simply described as that of the Gay Noble Savage. In all the stories the male protagonist, usually young, English, and middle-class, is involved with another male who is as different from him as the context of the tale will permit. Sir Richard Conway, successful businessman, has a hurried liaison with the local milkman, Arthur Snatchfold, in the story of that name. In "The Other Boat," the affair is between a young English officer, Lionel March, and a native boy, Cocomat, whom March describes as a "dago" and as having "[m]ore than a touch of the tar brush."¹ In the title story of the collection the relationship is between a young English priest and a native (tribal) chieftain, Athobai. He is an excellent example of the Gay Noble Savage—a character who is completely innocent, who trusts the missionary from Western civilization, and who is destroyed by him. He offers unlimited, honest, and guiltless love which the missionary cannot resist, but cannot face or accept in Athobai or in himself either. It is typical of these stories that this love and this openness cannot flourish and indeed doom the character to ruin and catastrophe brought on by society's opposition to homosexual love.

¹E. M. Forster, *The Life to Come*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (New York: Norton, 1972), p. xii.

One side of the relationship in these tales, then, is always occupied by someone who is outwardly respectable and bourgeois, with a place to uphold. On the other side is someone as different as possible, in race, culture, and economic or social status. That difference always means more freedom from social trammels. This partner is more open, more accepting of the love furtively offered him, more giving of his own affection—in short, more natural, than his respectable opposite number. He is more ready to take the joys of the moment without worrying about their implications for his reputation. The title, for example, of “What Does It Matter?” (in which a young gendarme has delightful sex with his country’s Prime Minister) is also its slogan. A person like this gendarme has all the favorable characteristics of the Noble Savage—truth and innocence, candor and forthrightness, scant sophistication, all made visible in physical beauty.

This relationship, or image of a relationship, provides the essential content of Forster’s homosexual stories, and, it may be inferred, of the fantasies from which the stories grew. It is not that Forster was childish enough to project himself as a handsome young Army officer or a rich businessman. Even in these very private stories (members of a class of stories written, as he said, “. . . not to express myself, but to excite myself . . .” p. xii) the artist’s disciplined imagination is at work. What Forster is projecting rather is a sense of his own circumstances—his own upper middle-class background, his outwardly uneventful artistic and academic life, his entrapment in respectability—his *place*, accepted and inviolable, yet stifling and wearisome, in the English society of his time. These are fantasies of escape, of course: escape to somewhere or someone representing the polar opposite of all that is known and familiar, escape to freedom and naturalness. And if the fabulous relationship just delineated represents Forster’s basic wish for an ideal partnership, what happens to it in the stories represents equally his fears for its life in the world.

Often the presence of the figure of the Gay Noble Savage is a catalyst, releasing his partner’s conflicts between the truth of his own feelings and wishes, and what he has been taught he ought to feel and do; the result is disaster. (Forster’s gentle humanism sometimes lets us forget how violent his fiction can be).

“The Other Boat,” perhaps the most powerful story in the collection, provides a case in point. Significantly, Oliver Stallybrass’s editorial studies show it to be the latest story in *The Life to Come*; it is Forster’s fullest presentation of the image of the ideal relationship and of that relationship’s disastrous course in reality. Going out to India as an Army captain, young Lionel March has to share a cabin with the “half-caste” Coccoanut. Coccoanut has arranged for this, it later appears, for he has been in love with Lionel since they both returned from India, where Lionel’s father had also served, ten years earlier on “the other boat.”

On the earlier trip Coccoanut had managed to drive Lionel’s mother to distraction and even into a state of trance; she intuits his strangeness and the danger he represents to Lionel, a feeling which she emphasizes by characterizing him as a “silly idle useless unmanly little boy” (p. 170); now, as an adult, he is still a “weird youth” with a “peculiar shaped head” (p. 171). This sense of Coccoanut is recalled several times. As the story unfolds, the element of fate is explicitly expressed: “Lionel had stepped on board . . . entirely the simple soldier man, without an inkling of his fate” (p. 174). His and Coccoa’s relationship, blissful at the time, is surrounded with the idea of entrapments, either concrete ones by the ship’s personnel, who must be tipped to keep quiet,

or more general and threatening ones, feelings that they too are fated or predestined: "There they lay caught, both of them, and did not know it, while the ship carried them *inexorably* towards Bombay" (p. 174; emphasis added).

Sharing the intimacy of a tiny cabin, Lionel and Cocomat soon enough share the intimacy of their bodies, with the aid of some strategically placed champagne. Forster is quite explicit here about the physicality of homosexual love, and strongly conveys the sense of Lionel's brutal gentleness, "Half Ganymede and half Goth" (p. 178), and of Cocomat's adoring submission. After a particularly passionate evening in the cabin, hard words develop between them, and Lionel goes on deck to smoke and to think. He thinks of fear, guilt, mother, loss of place, Cocoa's stratagems. Returning to the cabin Lionel finds Cocoa occupying his, Lionel's, bunk. The tension between them redevelops, and, suddenly, Lionel penetrates Cocoa once more as a "sweet act of vengeance . . . sweeter than ever for both of them" (p. 195) and in the act, strangles him: "Neither of them knew when the end came, and [Lionel] when he realized it felt no sadness, no remorse. It was part of a curve that had long been declining, and had nothing to do with death. He covered again with his warmth and kissed the closed eyelids tenderly and spread the bright-coloured scarf. Then he burst out of the stupid cabin onto the deck, and naked and with the seeds of love on him he dived into the sea" (p. 196).

Forbidden love ends in death, suicide, and posthumous disgrace. (Forster's next sentence is, "The scandal was appalling"). To see what caused such a tragedy, to see where that "curve that had long been declining" began, is to understand more clearly Forster's analysis of the liabilities of homosexual love.

Lionel is a soldier, a brave boy, and his root problem is fear. He is afraid of being alone, of being himself without the stays and props of the society that produced him. As he smokes, he looks around at his compatriots sleeping on deck, and the narrator relays his thoughts: "How decent and reliable they looked, the folk to whom he belonged! If he forfeited their companionship he would become nobody and nothing" (p. 192). His caste, as he calls it, his profession, his proper and virginal fiancée Isabel: losing them he would lose his identity and selfhood. What he would lose, should he and Cocoa be caught, is summed up and centrally figured by his mother, "blind-eyed in the midst of the enormous web she had spun—filaments drifting everywhere . . . she understood nothing and controlled everything. . . . the sight of him stripping would have killed her" (p. 193).

Mother as spider is an ugly image, and it suggests Lionel's unconscious sense of her and of her society. The social norms she embodies are the web to which Lionel plays fly. The observation that Lionel was "caught, and did not know it" thus takes on added meaning. He cannot choose to stay, he cannot choose to go.

Yet to Lionel nothing is intrinsically wrong about his and Cocoa's love, it is only that "If we got caught, there'd be absolute bloody hell to pay . . ." (p. 173). What comes to Lionel in their love is a deep sense of sexual liberation, "For he was of the conventional type who once the conventions are broken breaks them in little pieces, and for an hour or two there was nothing he wouldn't say or do" (p. 178). His joy is deep, and is compounded of a sense of risk, of real but unarticulated feeling and of the enormous sense of release that the relationship gives him.

Yet he cannot sustain it, and fear and society win, if murder and suicide can be considered symbols of victory. The scar on Lionel's groin (from his earlier

military career) is symbolic of his sexual inadequacy—that is, of his inability to commit himself to his own sexuality in the face of the demands society makes on him and of the values society has implanted in him. Society has scarred his sexuality indeed—aptly enough, in the aspect of his profession. The world and the flesh war in Lionel, and the outcome is so tragically wasteful that it is hard not to believe that the devil wins.

Forster's sketch of Lionel March suggests complexities beyond the young man's own cognizance. In India years earlier, Lionel's father had deserted family and class and gone native. Lionel bears something of his father's character, which tempts him over the borders of propriety, and also has his father's example, set before him by his mother, to redouble the horror and guilt if he should step across. Lionel March is unable to endure the relationship he has formed with Cocoa because so much of his being is established by his social context, and he is unable to quit because he is sensitive enough to love Cocoa and to respond to Cocoa's love for him. He is trapped in a situation which can have no good outcome. Forster does not blame some Cosmic Fatuity for all this, but Lionel's and Cocoa's tragedy is fated and inevitable nonetheless: they are both "caught" indeed. With Cocoa, Lionel may have established the only meaningful relationship he ever had to another human being, and society passes its judgment on that: "March had been a monster in human form, of whom the earth was well rid" (p. 196). Liaison with members of other social classes or races becomes in Forster's stories a phenomenon which emphasizes their distance doubly so for the homosexuals. Such is the case for the fantasy relationship Forster envisions is grim and tragic. The ideal cannot be brought into the real and survive. Nor can one retreat from reality. A man may wish to live in his private world always, accompanied by his Gay Noble Savage. But to Forster the reality is that a man cannot live outside society—it defines him and he defines himself against it. Since homosexuality is generally unacceptable to society, the wish and the reality must always be in conflict. And that conflict, as depicted in stories like "The Other Boat" must destroy the one in whom it takes place. "Only connect," Forster had pleaded in *Howard's End*, but the connection the homosexual must make to live cannot be made.

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"Bend Sinister": Duration in Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris*

Duration, the continuous unconscious welling-up of the past in one's memory, is the major theme of Elizabeth Bowen's fifth novel, *The House in Paris*. This theme is illustrated both by the novel's three-part narrative structure and by a complex pattern in which the linear flow of time is bent back against itself in a series of images which work on the reader's subconscious so that the act of reading the novel becomes itself an instance of its major theme.