



By E.M. Forster

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Understanding the Text

1. What do you understand of the three voices in response to the question 'What does a novel do' ?

Answer: The three voices stand for three different types of readers of novels. The first voice represents a good tempered person who is engaged in some other activity but is aware of the merits of literature. He does not have time and attitude to analyse the novel. He only vaguely knows that a novel deals with a story. The second voice represents the attitude of another type of readers of novel. This type of readers are aggressive and brisk. These type of readers treat novels very casually. They do not have time to analyse novels. They just want a story to read and pass time. The third voice is that of novelists like the author himself to whom story is the soul of a novel. All the three voices are unanimous that a novel ultimately tells a story.

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2. What would you say are 'the finer growths' that the story supports in a novel?

Answer: The finer growths that a story supports in a novel are the art of characterisation, the narrative techniques and thematic and plot structures. The story is the backbone, the basic structure without which the rest of the technicalities and structures are meaningless. It is the story line that determines the other features in a novel. The story contains the DNA of the novel.

3. How does Forster trace the human interest in the story to primitive times?

Answer: Forster traces the human interest in the story to primitive times by describing that the art of story telling is immensely old. It goes back to Neolithic times, perhaps to palaeolithic times. He refers to the Neanderthal man's liking of stories by referring to the anthropological evidence of the shape of the skull. To bring home the point further, Forster conjectures a picture of the primitive audience as an audience of shock heads, gaping round the camp fire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros and only kept awake by suspense. The novelist drones on and, as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him. Forster also refers to the character of Scheherazade who had to tell stories one after another to evade the danger of being killed by her husband. Forster mentions that Scheherazade's talent to tell suspense stories made her survive. In this way, Forster traces the human interest in the story to primitive times.

4. Discuss the importance of time in the narration of a story.

Answer: Forster brings out the importance of time in the narration of a story. He says that time is an integral part of a story. Though its appearance is both unlovely and dull, according to the essayist, yet he exhorts us to consider it first in connection with daily life.

Forster says that daily life is also full of the time sense. But in daily life one can think of any situation, even going beyond the time sequence. One can chose to think of any situation in the past or in the future without going by the strict order or sequence. This one does according to the value one attaches to a particular situation. In other words, according to Forster, daily life is practically composed of two lives-- the life in time and the life by values. Our conduct reveals a double allegiance. According to the essayist, the story narrates the life in time. In our daily life one can deny that time exists and act accordingly. But in case of a story, time sense cannot be denied otherwise it becomes unintelligible. The essayist mentions about many experiments made by the story tellers and novelists in which they wanted to narrate events by not following the exact time sequence. But these experiments failed to sway the readers. According to the essayist, the basis of a novel is a story and a story is a narrative of events in time sequence.

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