

## **E.M. Forster's Queer Re-Orientations: "Dr Woolacott" and "The Classical Annex"**

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### **Abstract**

E. M. Forster's short story collection *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972) features a set of intensely homoerotic stories. In this article, I re-address two of them: "Dr Woolacott" (1927) and "The Classical Annex" (1930) through the lens of Sara Ahmed's theory of Orientation. I shall argue that Forster's erotic short stories offer their potential readers the possibility to re-orientate themselves towards the representations of queerness and towards Forster himself. They manage to do this by presenting readers with depictions of queer realities that are often ignored or misinterpreted in a direct way, and by subverting the traditional discourses of pathology and aestheticism. I argue, as well, the criticism of these stories needs to be reviewed so that they may attract the critical attention they deserve among Forster's creations.

**Keywords:** E.M. Forster, Queer, Orientation, Sara Ahmed, Heteronormativity

**Re-orientaciones *queer* en los relatos "Dr Woolacott" y "The Classical Annex" de E.M. Forster**

### **Resumen**

En *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972), se incluyen algunos de los relatos homoeróticos más intensos del autor inglés E.M. Forster. En el presente artículo, exploro en profundidad dos de ellos: "Dr

Woolacott" (1927) y "The Classical Annex" (1930), usando como enfoque la teoría de la Orientación acuñada por Sara Ahmed. A través de esta conexión, argumentaré que los relatos eróticos de Forster ofrecen a sus lectores la posibilidad de re-orientarse hacia la representación de lo *queer* en los mismos y hacia la figura del propio autor. Esto se consigue mediante la representación, en los relatos, de realidades *queer* que son frecuentemente ignoradas a la vez que se subvierten los discursos patológicos y estéticos tradicionalmente relacionados con lo *queer* en esta época. Concluyo, por último, que la evaluación crítica de estos relatos necesita ser actualizada y revisada para que obtengan la relevancia que merecen entre las creaciones de Forster.

**Palabras clave:** E.M. Forster, Queer, Orientación, Sara Ahmed, Heteronormatividad

## 1. Introduction

For most of his adult life, British author E.M. Forster struggled with an almost obsessive feeling of inadequacy to write fiction. Fourteen years elapsed between the publication of the last of his early texts, *Howards End* (1910), and the public appearance of his last novel: *A Passage to India* (1924). In fact, as Max Saunders indicates, even if Forster's biographer, P.N. Furbank, stated that he "began to feel sterility as a writer in 1910" (192), the author's diaries prove that by 1904 he already felt that "[n]othing more great will come out of me" (qtd. in Furbank 121). Despite this self-perceived creative sterility, Forster continued to write short stories and essays, as well as composing another novel, *Maurice*, between 1913 and 1914.

The key to understand both Forster's difficulties in writing fiction and the reason why *Maurice* and the short stories were exceptions to these difficulties might be found in his essay "Anonymity: An Enquiry" (1925). In this essay, among other ideas, Forster places imagination over reverence in the following terms:

I'm not asking for reverence. Reverence is fatal to literature. My plea is for something more vital: imagination. ... imagination is our only guide into the world created by words ... and may the clergyman and the scientists pursue it more successfully in the future than they have in the past. (125)

The romantic theory that imagination, instead of reverence, should be the guiding force when writing fiction is essential to reappraise those difficulties and their exceptions. Forster, who was by then well-known and esteemed, seems to suggest through this theory that the respect of his contemporaries or, indeed, of future generations, towards an author or a theme should not be as important as the full and unlimited exercise of the author's imagination. In fact, an analysis of Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907) suggests that the author had been considering and nurturing this idea from as early as the period of the novel's composition. The main protagonist, Rickie Elliot, abandons his writing style and his over-imaginative narrative voice for one more socially acceptable and realistic, only to find his creativity –as well as his personal life– withering. The fact that the novel makes reference to many aspects of Forster's real life reinforces and supports the possibility of his having appraised the predominance of imagination over reverence for a long time.

It seems as if, at that point in his life, after having written his last novel, Forster was conscious of the fact that his creativity flowed more easily when he wrote following his inspiration without considering the effect that his writings might have on both critics and the public. He seems to claim, ultimately, that writing should be a liberating experience for the author, and that aiming for high, reverential topics is something of the past, whereas the future may encourage a more liberating kind of prose, in which every topic may be addressed despite its reputation or vulgarity. And in allowing writing to be liberating, he realised, laid the key to understanding his creative process.

The short story collection *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, published after Forster's death in 1972, includes some texts that may be read as liberating for Forster, in their free treatment of same-sex desire. These stories, I shall argue, can be seen as referential points

through which both Forster re-orient himself towards his own queer<sup>2</sup> sexuality. At the same time, they provide readers with another point of reference to re-orientate themselves towards the stories' true impact on queer culture. Following this thread, this article analyses and re-evaluates two of the stories, "Dr Woolacott" (1927) and "The Classical Annex" (1930), through the perspective of the concept of Orientation as developed by Sarah Ahmed, underlining how these largely ignored texts can be of academic interest for those willing to reconsider Forsterian representations of queerness.

## 2. Orientation and References

In her study of the history of happiness, Sara Ahmed sees unhappy endings as "a political gift" (88), since they enabled the publication of queer fiction during the second half of the twentieth century. This consideration –the matching of unhappy endings with public suitability– was quite possibly also on Forster's mind when, earlier on, he was writing homoerotic fiction. He was adamant about the fact that *Maurice* ought to have a happy ending, but the pessimistic tone in his lately added "terminal note" to the novel shows that he was worried and uncertain about whether such a happy ending could ever happen in real life or, indeed, be tolerated by readers. In the short stories I have selected, intended only for private eyes, as their contents made them "impossible for Forster to offer them for publication" (Head 77), this consideration becomes distorted, and the endings are, at best, ambiguous in their prospect of (un)happiness. That ambiguity, which will be further considered in the analysis of the stories, bears witness to the stories' questioning of the situation of homosexuality, their main theme, on Forster's socio-cultural context. This questioning of the social and cultural status of homosexuality is, I shall argue, what makes these stories so relevant to contemporary queer scholars. Through both their ambiguous endings and their often humorous but always critical plots, they provide both Forster and their potential readers with a re-orientation towards love and desire between men, as noted earlier.

The idea of "Orientation," as will be used here, was originally developed by Sarah Ahmed in her essay "Orientations Towards a

Queer Phenomenology,” published in *GLQ* in 2006. Since then, it has become a relevant concept in Queer Studies, as well as in other areas of literary research.<sup>3</sup> Although Ahmed develops the concept in close connection to phenomenology, considering how “consciousness is always directed toward objects and hence is always worldly, situated, and embodied” (544), she goes well beyond physical boundaries when claiming that orientations are also “the site of an encounter” (545). She delves into cultural and social realms, as well as into the palpable, physical realm, by proposing an idea of orientation that enables an encounter with those aspects of life that are usually at our “back” (546). She states that objects –i.e. palpable constructions– as well as realities –i.e. social and cultural circumstances– must be encountered, arrived at, since we are oriented towards some of them through our social and cultural circumstances and are therefore constantly turning our back towards others (547). This means that these socio-cultural circumstances condition most individuals into orienting themselves towards the world through a heteronormative vision of reality. Traditional education and cultural forms favour a heterosexual orientation that necessarily relegates any queer reality to the background, for if we are oriented by the heteronorm, we must fail to consider the nuances of queer realities towards which we are not traditionally looking (547-50). Following this interpretation, queer people’s orientation towards queer realities remains unacknowledged and poorly addressed by mainstream cultural mores.

If most people are then, unquestionably, oriented towards heterosexual culture, Ahmed claims that, in order for an encounter with queer culture to take place, a re-orientation must first occur: a change of points of reference through which to look at realities. To illustrate this, Ahmed uses Edmund Husserl’s example of how writers at their writing desk are oriented towards a certain set of realities: their writing, their topic, or even the public nature of the text. They are thus oblivious to the more private and commonplace realities taking place at their background: noises from the kitchen, or the children playing. Ahmed, however, emphasizes the fact that the different realities are only separated by the individual’s perception, that is, by how they are oriented (546-7). In this case, Ahmed indicates, the table would be the point of reference from which the individual’s attention focuses on one reality to turn their back to other realities. In the same

sense, the traditional predominance of heteronormative discourse in most socio-cultural texts tends to place the focus on heterosexuality. According to Ahmed “to become straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line” (554). Ahmed argues, consequently, that in order for individuals to encounter, that is, to become oriented towards queer realities –too often only contemplated by queer individuals– the points of reference from which we become oriented must be changed.

Forster's homoerotic short stories, in this way, could be considered as queer points of reference. They achieve this referential status, according to Ahmed's conceptualisation of the term, through their prevalence of imagination over reverence, that is, their elevation of the author's identity over social codes regulating sexuality as they, in accordance with Ahmed's theory, “make things queer [because they] disturb the order of things” (565). The stories challenge traditional orientations and make not only the reader, but also the author, reorient themselves towards queerness. As Forster explored his queer desires and identity, he created a set of texts that provided a drastic new way to look into homosexuality for a person raised and educated in the nineteenth century. For today's readers, they allow not only a deeper look into Forster's queer reality, but also a new standpoint from which to reconsider how Victorian paradigms of sexual deviancy were being rearticulated at the beginning of the century by people who, like Forster, had been educated in nineteenth-century institutions. These representational paradigms have been well defined by Dominic Janes in his book *Picturing the Closet* (2015), that traces some of the medical, social, and aesthetic values usually employed to represent homosexuality. According to Janes, these paradigms were recreated by homosexual writers “to mount powerful, if coded, attacks on the social practices and values of the nineteenth century” without declaring “one's sexual deviance” (83). Forster's homoerotic short stories, however, draw on both those codes and humour to openly address established social practices and values, as the stories openly expose Forster's “sexual deviance.” As points of reference for queer orientations, thus, the stories go well beyond the criticism they have received until now.

David Medalie states that Forster could be seen as “an awkward straddle(r) of traditions ... one who consoled more and more as the century seemed to become less gentle and less kind to liberalism and humanism” (2). The short stories I will address in the next section of this article, “Dr Woolacott” and “The Classical Annex,” are perfect examples of this “straddling” of traditions. This statement underlines the re-orientating character of the stories, which illustrate how Forster looks at the previously mentioned Victorian paradigms of queer representations and how, at the same time, he makes himself and his readers look into new ways of representing homosexuality without fully disentangling himself from these paradigms. His humanist interest in creating less tragic and more humorous stories for homosexual men should be seen as referential, as a feature that goes well beyond the criticism usually received by these stories. Medalie argues that Forster’s “Anonymity” could also be read as the author’s defence of the symbolic power of anonymously written stories (84). It is true that their private nature might have been what enabled Forster to create such eloquent re-orientations in these stories, and their cultural symbolism is, definitely, worth being considered as referential.

### **3. Re-Orientating Forster**

Forster was most prolific when his imagination was unbridled by reverence, and by consideration of what was expected of his prose and of his critical reception. As a result of this understanding, Forster starts to privately produce texts in which he expresses his inner concerns and longings, and where his imagination and fantasies are unfettered from reverence. These texts enable him to articulate his sexual identity, thus fostering the author’s independence from socially accepted perceptions and, as will be further discussed, effectively terminating his creative drought. The assumption that the writing of texts in which the expression of Forster’s sexual identity and desires was determinant for his overcoming his creative difficulties is a common one among literary critics who study his work. Furbank states that not being able to express his homosexual desires made writing conventional novels boring for Forster (12). Furthermore, contemporary Forsterian critics, such as David Bradshaw (2) or Max

Saunders (11), agree with Furbank's assessment and place Forster's sexual repression at the core of his creative drought, speculating with the idea of how his sexuality might have affected both his previous compositions and his later years. Oliver Stallybrass's and Forster's own opinion on this topic will be more carefully examined further alongside specific criticism directed to the stories this article will address. These critics regard this shedding of reverence in favour of sexually related imaginations ambivalently, considering that the quality of Forster's texts suffered despite their liberating effect on the author's writing.

The texts that produced this liberating and self-exploratory effect, despite Forster's reputation as a novelist, are mostly short stories. Even if *Maurice* (1913-4) remains his most well-known homoerotic text, during the twenties Forster wrote many short stories where homosexuality is the central issue. Forster was able to do this through his short stories because, as Judith S. Herz indicates this genre's relative novelty allowed the writer to escape the conventions of the novel (8). When these tales were posthumously published, in an edited volume entitled *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, they were dismissed as minor romantic fantasies: Forster's indulgencies, an outburst of sexual imagination, something both culturally and socially demeaning. In this article, however, I will analyse how, in opposition to this widespread critical standpoint, the short stories within *The Life to Come* are indeed some of Forster's most revolutionary and modern writings. I will go on to argue that two of these stories specifically, "Dr Woolacott" and "The Classical Annex," demand a reassessment of their literary recognition, as they might be considered queer points of reference in literature. These short stories offer a triumph of imagination over reverence in their sexual and comical nature, as well as a glimpse on Forster's evolving consciousness over his own identity and the terms in which it might be expressed.

However, in order to understand the nature of these texts as potential queer references, it is important to briefly contemplate their reception among literary critics. Relevant Forsterian critics, like Oliver Stallybrass, who edited the fourteen short stories –(eight of which are openly homoerotic) for the Abinger Press after Forster's death, contributed to create a general sense of literary 'unworthiness,' by

suggesting that they were deviations that corrupted Forster's otherwise respected career. His attitude towards the homoerotic stories is implicitly expressed in his introduction to the collection, in which sexual acts between males are termed "buggery" (xv), while the reader is assured that "[f]or better or worse, however, the actual physical encounters are described briefly and, by the standards of today, with circumspection" (xv) and that "good clean fun is not irretrievably compromised by an infusion of dirt" (xvi). Leaving aside the scruples he feels regarding his reader's assumed heterosexual sensibilities, Stallybrass also ponders whether the homosexual stories might have been detrimental to Forster's "tensions" and "a distraction from art" (xiv) rather than art. He does acknowledge, however, that the writing of these stories became the only way in which Forster could express himself and that Forster's "gradual acceptance of himself as a homosexual made the decision to abandon the writing of fiction for publication heroic but almost inevitable" (xiv). Stallybrass's initial assessment of these stories is completed by his quoting Forster's statement that these were his "sexy stories," which he wrote to "excite" himself rather than to "express" himself (xv). Whether it is possible or not to express an essential part of oneself (i.e., one's sexual identity) when writing about one's excitement is left unaddressed. More worthy of attention than this, perhaps, is the critical reception that these stories are still receiving.

It seems that Stallybrass's original perception, far from having evolved throughout the years since the publication of *The Life to Come*, is still deep-seated among some researchers and critics. A clear example of this can be seen in the attention (or lack thereof) that some of the homoerotic stories receive in recent seminal publications such as *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster* (2007). In this collection of essays only two chapters focus on *The Life to Come* with a certain degree of detail: "Forster and the Short Story," by Dominic Head, and "Forsterian Sexuality," by Christopher Lane. For Head, the stories' literary quality suffers because "the recurring theme of repressed homosexuality in the collection can be seriously limiting" (87), while he comments only on two stories, "The Life to Come" (1922) and "The Other Boat" (1957-8), in which homosexuality is "interestingly linked to colonialism" (87). Lane, on the other hand, focuses on the violent nature of these same stories and on how some

of the other stories fail to align Forster's "sexuality ... with his political values" (114). What both Head's and Lane's otherwise thought-provoking and nuanced analyses seem to be lacking –thus perpetuating Stallybrass's notions about the stories' quality– is an acknowledgement of the short stories' revolutionary qualities that runs counter to their academically neglected status. These revolutionary qualities are better understood when we focus on the imaginative and liberating aspects of the short stories. In order to gain such an understanding of these narratives, we must review the texts and look at them as Forster's attempt to navigate the tricky waters of his Victorian sexual upbringing, as well as to articulate a more hopeful future where his homosexual fantasies may become true. An effective re-assessment of the stories that brings to the fore these qualities can be achieved by examining them through the lens of Ahmed's theory of Orientation. Ahmed's conceptualisation of queerness in relation with Orientation enables the positioning of Forster's short stories as points of reference for both the author and the potential readers, as it favours a revision of the realities he was turning his back to, and those he was considering and exploring. Following Ahmed's ideas, Forster's stories can be seen as maps that orientate us towards him in a new fashion –perhaps less reverential and more imaginatively-laden– just as they might have oriented the author towards his own homosexuality.

An in-depth and complete study of Forster's homoerotic short stories would exceed the scope of this article. Although such a study is necessary, it would require a re-assessment of at least seven known short stories written in the span of thirty-five years. The first homoerotic story in the collection was written in 1922, while the last was written in 1957-8. This is not to say that Forster had not written homoerotic stories before or that he did not keep doing so afterwards. In fact, his story "The Story of a Panic" (1911) was published in Forster's lifetime despite its obvious homoerotic connotations. I have selected two short stories from *The Life to Come*, however, because they not only clearly address some of the most important processes of queer re-orientation carried out in Forster's fiction, and because they also are some of the most openly homoerotic. Even though the two stories were written in different years and their main themes are not completely similar, they share some important features. Both are closely related to

traditional attitudes towards homosexuality. Medical, classical and cultural discourses and ideologies appear in each of the stories, and in each of them such discourses are distorted and questioned. Additionally, both “Dr Woolacott” and “The Classical Annex” end with the promise of a better future (or afterlife), and both share comic features. The interconnections between these two pieces are even more relevant when considering Forster’s own educational background, which is essential to comprehend the stories’ referential value.

Forster was a product of the Victorian educational establishment. White, middle-class, and educated in a public school, Tonbridge School, which he never liked (Saunders 9) and at Cambridge University, Forster spent his youth in a social context that exemplifies Ahmed’s conception of a heteronormative reality that turns its back towards queer realities. This does not mean that, as Janes indicates, there were not “coded” (83) ways in which homosexuality could be addressed and discussed. Medical discourse pathologised deviant sexualities and rejected attempts to review this doctrine, as it was generally believed that homosexual acts “had dire health consequences” (Upchurch 191). In fact, Upchurch claims that Richard von Krafft-Ebbing’s book, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), was “dismissed and condemned by the British medical community as promoting decadence and immorality” (191), even if it still classified homosexuality as a pathology. At the same time, moreover, Greek and Roman art and aestheticism became powerful ways for artists such as Walter Pater or Oscar Wilde, as well as for many Classics students, like Forster himself, to express and make sense of same-sex desire, albeit in a covert fashion (Friedman 15). And legal discourse, in its attempt to banish and silence these sexualities, actually articulated their presence and importance within Victorian society.<sup>4</sup>

A more mature Forster, however, witnessed how, at the turn of the century, a set of early activists sought to reclaim these discourses to defend same-sex desire. He witnessed how writers and social activists –such as Edward Carpenter, John Addington Symonds, and Havelock Ellis– exemplifying Ahmed’s theory, sought to reorient public opinion from a heteronormative approach to sexuality towards an approach that would contemplate homosexuality equally. To do so, they tried to reclaim medical, cultural, and legal referents. Forster, in the stories

analysed below, does something akin to this while exploring his own sexuality, evidence of the “straddling” value, or in-betweenness, of these writings.

### 3.1 “Dr Woolacott”

The protagonist of “Dr Woolacott” is a young squire named Clesant suffering from an unspecified yet far-reaching disease that deems him a “chronic invalid” (84). The condition, diagnosed and treated by the family doctor, Woolacott, is closely related to the squire’s heart, and makes him unable “to marry or manage the estates,” typical markers of traditional heteronormative masculinity, as well as to “be intimate with other people” (83). Furthermore, he is medically warned against playing the violin, his true passion. Despite this, Clesant is seduced by a strong and healthy young farmer who claims to be a former soldier and to have been treated in the past by Dr Woolacott, against whom he warns Clesant. As the squire feels for the first time that he can “provoke desire,” he abandons Woolacott’s recommendations (“... to hell with Woolacott,” 89) and acts on his desires for the farmer. Shortly after that, however, Clesant suffers a fit and the reader learns that the farmer was only an illusion imagined by him while playing the violin, thus disobeying Woolacott’s medical advice.

However anticlimactic the plot of the story may appear, its ending is, in fact, a happy one for the protagonist,<sup>5</sup> as well as what makes it relevant to this study. In death, the protagonist is reunited with his farmer lover, who is suggested to be a soldier killed by Woolacott’s malpractices during the war. The ending reads almost as marriage vows –“We shall be together for ever and ever, we shall never be ill, and never grow old,’ ... They entwined more closely, their lips touched never to part” (96)– and the afterlife is shown to be a hopeful place for queer love.

The defeat of Woolacott’s doctrine, however, constitutes a fundamental element to understand this story as a point of queer reference. His failure to save the protagonist’s life and the happiness brought to him by this fact orients readers towards the story’s real implications in terms of social and medical criticism. According to Janes, this criticism is coherent with Lytton Strachey’s almost

contemporary attempt to emphasise how recent disasters in Britain and Europe were the result of the repressions carried on by the Victorians in their institutions, including the medical profession (110). This limited and punishing stance on homosexuality and its consequences is at the core of Forster's story. Woolacott's attitude towards Cleasant's homosexuality is clear: "Aware of all his weaknesses, Dr Woolacott had warned him against this one" (92), and he is quick and forceful in his dismissal of the young man's lover: "He does not exist. He is an illusion, whom you created in the garden because you wanted to feel you were attractive" (94). His forbidding the protagonist to play the violin and become intimate with people can be read as a symbolic representation of medical attitudes towards homosexuality and their attempt to prevent its potential spread. However, the protagonist's disobedience, even if it causes his death, is a reflection of what Forster himself was doing in placing imagination over reverence. To challenge heteronormative expectations and take an active orientation towards one's own queer reality might have terrible consequences, as evidenced by Cleasant's sudden death, but it is also accompanied by the promise of happiness and love in the future. In other words, through this short story Forster turns his back to the hegemonic "medical model that pathologized love between men" (Ivory 154), represented by Woolacott and his advice, and orients the story towards an ending that contemplates the possibility of an (after)life that fosters the love this model condemns.

This referencing takes place by breaking the main premise of heteronormativity. According to Ahmed, this premise is based on the fact that "subjects are required to tend toward some objects and not others, as a condition of familial as well as social love" (557). These objects, in a traditional heteronormative plot, would be the protagonist's reproductive health or even a traditional relationship with a woman. In "Dr Woolacott," however, the main subject is "required to tend toward" his violin and towards a male farmer. As readers, we are made to look at non-heteronormative objects through the protagonist's actions and, therefore, are reoriented towards a queer reality. Ahmed proposes to "face the back," that is, the overlooked (queer) aspects of existence, and to exchange the realities towards which heteronormative tradition tends for others that run counter to hegemonic discourses. This re-orientation, this exchange of realities,

is what effectively takes place in the story, as the attention is placed on a sort of desire that would not normally be foregrounded.

In spite of the story's more or less direct critique of the triumph of medicine over free sexual expression, its many cultural and political implications are reinforced in its message: love, even if it is conducive to death, is preferable to a life of social and sexual normativity. However, this powerful message, as well as the previously mentioned critique, has not been enough to draw the attention of critics who have largely left "Dr Woolacott" unexplored. The scarcity of critical attention received by Forster's imaginative piece is a common feature to both this and the following short story: "The Classical Annex."

### 3.2 "The Classical Annex"

"The Classical Annex" draws on Greco-Roman art and its accompanying symbolism to comment on another aspect of the fraught relationship between heteronormative and queer realities from the Victorian era to the early years of the twentieth century. In the story, the curator of the Municipal Museum at the fictional town of Bigglesmouth, constantly neglects the Classical Annex because of the art's poor quality. He is shocked, however, when he discovers that one of the statues there, "an athlete or gladiator of the non-intellectual type" (147) is able to become sentient and move. The statue's intentions, furthermore, seem to be erotic in nature, since his nineteenth-century added fig leaf keeps falling to the ground due to an "obscene change in the statue's physique" (148). The curator discovers, relieved, that making the sign of the cross returns the statue back to its original petrified state and hastens home. He finds there that his young son, Denis, has gone to the museum to look for him. After rushing back to the museum, he finds Denis and the statue giggling and contemplates "gladiatorial feints, post-classical suction. A brute planning its revenge" (150). As the curator once again performs the sign of the cross, both the statue and his son remain petrified in an eternal act of "hysterics ... and grunts" (150).

However funny and risqué the story might read, its re-orienting potential, as in the case of "Dr Woolacott" lies in its ending. Not only do the statue and Denis seem to have been petrified in a state of

sexual ecstasy, but more importantly this fact remains unseen and ignored by those who contemplate the newly formed statue:

And in after years a Hellenistic group called The Wrestling Lesson became quite a feature at Bigglesmouth, though it was not exhibited until the Curator and the circumstances of his retirement were forgotten. 'Very nice piece, very decent' was [the] opinion. 'Look 'ow the elder brother's got the little chappie down. Look 'ow well the little chappie's taking it. (150)

Although this short story has been interpreted elsewhere as a reinvention of the myth of Pygmalion,<sup>6</sup> and its Biblical overtones are also worth discussing, the statue's audience's failure to interpret it is even more significant. In the fictitious spectators' eyes the two men, as the previous quote indicates, are seen as two brothers wrestling instead of two lovers erotically engaged. The public's inability to see what is actually taking place in the sculpture is Forster's way to draw the potential reader's attention to the ability of Greek and Roman art to codify homosexuality in a way readable mostly only for savants. The public's ignorance when facing such an obvious representation of queer sexuality illustrates Ahmed's idea of how most individuals are oriented to reality through a heteronormative view that excludes the ability to properly address queer realities. The spectators might be said to be, in fact, disoriented, in as much as they are unequipped to interpret the queer reality they are contemplating because they orient themselves towards the world following heteronormative parameters.

In this sense, Ahmed's theory works perfectly alongside Forster's story, since in the tale the reader's attention is drawn towards a non-articulated Orientation in the same sense in which the term is developed by Ahmed. At the same time, through the story he reorients us to look into the statue in a very different way. He places ignorance, foolishness, prudery and superstition as attributes of both the curator and the visitors. As Jennifer Ingleheart points out:

In the transformation of the statue and Denis into the new Hellenistic group in which their bodies are

entwined, Forster presents us with the merging of lover and beloved to create a new and beautiful entity ... rewarding his lovers with a form of deathless marriage. (151)

The “beautiful entity” created and its “deathless marriage” indicate that Forster places, on the other hand, happiness on the fate of these homosexual lovers, even if they are petrified by Christian conventions. In this way, the story acts in a similar fashion as “Dr Woolacott,” as it also gives value to the imaginative performance of sexual desire over the repressive ideals of a revered social discourse. The statue’s spectators are precluded from knowing its real significance, and therefore to celebrate or share its felicitous meaning, as they remain oriented towards the “regulatory norm” and are thus unable to look at the queer reality taking place in front of them. The spectators’ ignorance is best understood after considering Ahmed’s idea that

Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. (555)

In other words, the spectators, as symbols of a larger audience who is used to consume heteronormative culture, are unable to direct their attention following a “line of motion” that orientate them towards queerness. They might be so accustomed to perceiving realities, artistic or otherwise, in traditionally heteronormative terms that they cannot see the queer act represented by the statue. This misrepresentation has taken place so many times in cultural contexts that it has created a “line of motion” that directs spectators towards assuming that the sculpture does not stand for a queer reality. The readers of the short story, however, are forced to go outside these lines of motion, to break the repetition of “routes and paths taken” and to be re-oriented towards the statue’s real queer meaning. In this sense, this story acts as a re-orientation for readers because it allows them to contemplate the ways in which the lines of motion created by

heterosexual culture might blind them to reality. To follow the metaphor of Husserl's table, the sculpture acts as a reference that allows readers to realize how mistaken their conceptions about sexuality can be, and how conspicuous queerness actually is.

Ultimately, Forster's story evidences the importance of art in homosexual discourse as well as how the author's private sexual and comic fantasies are, in fact, powerful disruptors of established norms and traditional orientations. Forster imagined a story in which homosexuality is preserved and turned into something beautiful, even admired, whereas conventional heterosexual orientations become the laughing point of the story. By bringing homosexuality to the foreground and heterosexuality to the background, Forster also gives the values of each to the other. Homosexuality, when we re-orientate ourselves towards it, acquires the desirability that is usually associated with heterosexuality in many fictional narratives. The sculptural group resulting from the gladiator and Denis's embrace is, as Ingleheart indicates, some sort of unconventional yet beautiful union between male lovers. And this union not only fails to be chastised by heteronormative onlookers, but it is also utilized as a way to put these same onlookers into an unimportant, even comical background that is most frequently reserved for the representation of queer individuals. This successful re-orientation could be seen not only as revolutionary for its period, but also as a relevant and much-needed model for contemporary depictions of same-sex desire that, even nowadays, still fail to consider the positive vital possibilities existing outside heteronormativity.

#### **4. Conclusions**

According to Sara Ahmed, in facing an object we relegate others to the background. This also happens with certain realities, when we are oriented towards one, we tend to relegate others so that our attention keeps on being fixed in what interests us (546-7). Forster's homoerotic short stories, and more specifically those addressed here, draw our attention, precisely, to the occurrences that are usually relegated to the background. In the case of "The Classical Annex," more specifically, we can even observe the process of (heteronormative) misinterpretation through which these realities are

relegated. They make us look into homosexual desire and love beyond the restrictions of socially revered discourses, and in doing so re-orient us not only towards queer fantasies of disruption, but also towards a re-assessment of these stories' literary value.

By bringing two same-sex relationships to the foreground and offering romantically positive if unconventional endings to "Dr Woolcott" and "The Classical Annex," Forster challenges heterosexuality's prevalent role in fiction. In fact, as has been stated previously, heterosexuality is displayed at the background, as failing enforcers of sexual and medical discipline or as unwitting spectators of a sexual encounter between two men. This unusual reversal of places –which has an almost comic effect– is yet another instance of how imagination can disrupt reverence, and how Forster's free expression of his sexual desires and fantasies should be carefully considered.

It is important to consider these stories as more than sexual fantasies of a repressed middle-aged man. Reading, for instance, "Anonymity" is insightful in as much as it provides us with an interpretation of how liberating the experience of writing these texts at the margins of social respectability and reverence might have been for the author. Imagination is presented unbound, creating situations that might have been impossible to articulate in Forster's novels, even in *Maurice*. The complex interplay between established discourses, their subversions and the stories' endings make them adequate points of reference towards a queer reality that was fast changing, straddling the Victorian period of Forster's youth and the early twentieth century. "Dr Woolcott" and "The Classical Annex" act, in a way, like Husserl's table, because through them, the readers of the stories might effectively and directly look at realities that are usually left outside their attention. Forster manages to achieve this by placing these normally ignored matters in lieu of the table, by making them conspicuous, instead of letting them be a blurred shape in the background. Even if the spectators of the statue in "The Classical Annex" are blinded by heteronormativity and cannot interpret what they have been oriented towards, readers are left with no choice but to correctly understand what they are looking at. An encounter is produced, thus, between potential readers and both the imaginative

and sexually charged texts of an author trying to make sense of his sexuality and of the way in which that sexuality fits in the world, and also with a set of texts whose literary relevance is usually left unacknowledged. These two short stories, more specifically, have traditionally been neglected as their impact for both Forster's personal development and for queer representation has been overshadowed by previous critical assessments. This lack of critical attention should be addressed and reversed. The stories' exceptional treatment of sexuality and their comment on heteronormativity should make them deserving of an updated assessment that may be in consonance with contemporary literary studies.

Although Forster is a widely read and analysed author, *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, and specifically its homoerotic short stories, have yet to receive proper critical attention. The collection's original prologue, still in circulation and charged with a language that is not oriented towards queer reality, should perhaps reflect the collection's potential merits as well as its weaknesses. Considering the stories as points of reference that facilitate a re-orientation to traditionally ignored topics as well as to Forster's fantasies and disruptions, might also help to dispel the view that their treatment of sexuality is limiting.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> I am well aware of the fact that applying the term "queer" to the expression of homoerotic or homosexual desire and romance in a set of texts belonging to the early twentieth century might be considered problematic by some. I find myself, however, justified in doing this due to two reasons: the term's definition(s) and the antecedents for doing so. On the one hand, "Queer" as thought by Judith Butler implies a "genealogical critique of the queer subjects" ("Critically Queer" 20), which suggests the importance of considering past

individuals when dealing with queerness. On the other hand, the term's retrospective application keeps growing in popularity as studies such as Dustin Friedman's *Before Queer Theory* (2019) demonstrate.

<sup>3</sup> The concept's on-going relevance is unquestionable. In fact, thirteen years after Ahmed's publication it is still being applied and debated in academic conferences. For instance, the international seminar "Neo-Victorian Orientations in the Twenty-First Century," held in May 2019 at the University of Málaga highlighted the fruitfulness of this concept and its potential to connect and re-explore canonical texts. Charlotte Wadeaux's report on the conference emphasizes its internationality and the impact of Ahmed's orientation on current literary research (220).

<sup>4</sup> Although by 1861 the death penalty for intercourse between men was abolished, the 1885 Labouchère Amendment reinforced the punishment for men who engaged in "any act of gross indecency" (qtd. in Ivory 16), making England one of the most hostile countries for homosexuals in Europe.

<sup>5</sup> As has been stated previously, Ahmed problematizes the idea of "happy endings" in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), although I use it in this article to refer exclusively to the story's potential positive message.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Dr Laura Monrós, from the University of Valencia, for drawing my attention, through various academic conversations, to the similarities between those texts, as well as for many other interesting suggestions on statuesque significance.

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