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MACMILLAN MASTER GUIDES

A PASSAGE TO INDIA

BY E. M. FORSTER

HILDA D. SPEAR

M
MACMILLAN

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To Walter — again

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The aim of the Macmillan Master Guides is to help you to appreciate the book you are studying by providing information about it and by suggesting ways of reading and thinking about it which will lead to a fuller understanding. The section on the writer's life and background has been designed to illustrate those aspects of the writer's life which have influenced the work, and to place it in its personal and literary context. The summaries and critical commentary are of special importance in that each brief summary of the action is followed by an examination of the significant critical points. The space which might have been given to repetitive explanatory notes has been devoted to a detailed analysis of the kind of passage which might confront you in an examination. Literary criticism is concerned with both the broader aspects of the work being studied and with its detail. The ideas which meet us in reading a great work of literature, and their relevance to us today, are an essential part of our study, and our Guides look at the thought of their subject in some detail. But just as essential is the craft with which the writer has constructed his work of art, and this may be considered under several technical headings – characterisation, language, style and stagecraft, for example.

The authors of these Guides are all teachers and writers of wide experience, and they have chosen to write about books they admire and know well in the belief that they can communicate their admiration to you. But you yourself must read and know intimately the book you are studying. No one can do that for you. You should see this book as a lamp-post. Use it to shed light, not to lean against. If you know your text and know what it is saying about life, and how it says it, then you will enjoy it, and there is no better way of passing an examination in literature.

JAMES GIBSON

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HILDA D. SPEAR

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INTRODUCTION:

ON READING A NOVEL

When we read a novel – any novel – what do we expect from it? Is our first purpose to be informed, to be educated, to receive a moral, a social or a political lesson? It should not be: novels are meant to be enjoyed – enjoy them! The very worst way to read a novel for the first time is to read with pen in hand laboriously taking notes as you go; but notice those words ‘for the first time’: any novel worth reading is worth reading twice – or three times – or again and again and again! No one can read a novel for you; someone may tell you the story but this is merely the skeleton, which the novelist fleshes out; the novel itself is much more than mere story. A quick first reading will help you to find your way about a novel but it will not have told you all about it. This introduction suggests some lines of thought for you to follow on your second and subsequent readings.

Who narrates the story? Is it told in the first person, the ‘I’ being the subject of the tale? Or is it perhaps in the third person, an omniscient narrator observing objectively the actions and thoughts of all the protagonists? Or is it more subtle than either of these simple methods? Are there several tellers, looking at the story from their own differing viewpoints, or telling different parts of the story? Is the main narrator an auditor too, who receives the story from one or more other narrators? Or is it difficult to decide who is telling the story, as it seems to be happening in the minds of the characters themselves? The method of narration has always exercised novelists, for on it depends the understanding and varying sympathies of the reader. A reminiscent first person story starts off with certain pre-suppositions – at least the protagonist survives and is able to tell the tale. On the other hand, the all-knowing third person narrator may predispose us to like or dislike particular characters; we may even feel that our sympathies are being manipulated.

From what point of view do we see the events of the novel? The straightforward first person narrator will tell the story from his own point of view; even if he attempts to show us other points of view they will be sifted

through his own and we shall receive an essentially subjective account. The third person narration, from an impartial outside observer, generally purports to be objective; as soon as the narration is complicated, however, by the use of narrators with some sort of identity within the novel, then we must take into account narrative fallibility. The author may deliberately choose to have an unreliable or dishonest or naïve narrator; or perhaps one or more of the narrators will not have access to full information; on the other hand, a number of different subjective accounts of the same incident may give the reader an objective view. Certainly the narrative mode allows of wide variety and perhaps the only golden rule here is, 'Never confuse the narrator with the author'.

We can move on from discussion of the narrative method to consider the use of time in the novel. Even if there is no obvious exploitation of time as a narrative device we cannot avoid at least some thoughts on its significance. When was the novel written? If it was written fifty, or a hundred, or two hundred years ago we must remember the differences that scientific and technological advances have made to our lives today, the differences in cleanliness, in household convenience, in leisure activities, in travel and communication; we must remember the differences in social, moral and religious attitudes and in family life. We shall also have to come to terms with the vocabulary and the prose style of an older novel. An historical novel may compound our problems, for we may be observing events of hundreds or thousands of years ago, interpreted through the understanding of an author from an age that is already past.

There are, however, other aspects of the novelist's use of time which we need to consider as we read. The simplest of these is that we may have to cope, in a few hours' reading, with the events of many years and adjust, in minutes, our response to slowly altering circumstances and gradual changes in character. More complicated are the deliberate time-shifts which the novelist makes in order to achieve particular effects: the flashback, the flashforward, the events narrated in reverse order, the events narrated more than once and at different points in the novel. Observe these as you read and ask yourself what the author achieves by playing with time in such ways.

Then there is the question of place. Where is the action of the novel set? Is it in some distant, exotic, foreign land that most of us will never see? Is it in the country? In the town? Is it so unfamiliar that it warrants several pages of description? Or is it familiar enough to need none? How essential to the plot is the setting? Does it give atmosphere to the novel? Or is it entirely insignificant, referred to hardly at all? The sense of place may well reinforce themes within the novel, or different characters may be associated with different places, the aspects of which reflect the characters themselves.

Of course, you will think about the characters as you read their story. You will decide who is the hero (if there is a hero) and who is the heroine (if there is a heroine) and even who is the villain (if there is a villain); but how are these characters portrayed? Are they cardboard figures, lacking solidity? Are they caricatures, with only one feature of the characters emphasised? Are they mere reflectors, throwing light on other characters? Are they functional, fulfilling a particular but limited role? Or do they seem to be real people, reacting differently according to the circumstances, showing various aspects of their character, changing, growing, gaining our human sympathy and understanding? A good novel will probably have most if not all of these types of characters; those we respond to most readily are the ones who seem to be real but, as in life, there will be many characters who are seen briefly, superficially, who play their part in the plot and disappear from the scene; without them the novel would be poorer.

When Polonius asked Hamlet what he was reading, the reply was 'Words, words, words'. A novel is composed of words and ultimately its success depends on the choice of words, the use of language and the style for, skilfully couched in telling phrases, the dullest story may blossom, whilst the most exciting incidents may appear dull and insipid if they are recounted in flat tones and commonplace clichés. Observe how your author uses language. Is there a variety of style – formal? Colloquial? Poetic? Are there recurrent words and phrases? Realistic pictures which become images and symbols? Catchwords? Motifs? Repetitions? References? Quotations? Allusions? Is there dialogue? Do the characters speak in their own special idiom? Are we given the thoughts in their minds? Perhaps the very fact that we had not noticed the peculiarities of the language on a first reading demonstrates the skill of the author. However, that a technique is unobtrusive does not mean that it is insignificant and the better critics we become, the more we shall observe not only *what* is said but *how* it is said.

Perhaps the final needful question is, 'How do we become better critics?' Have courage! Many of us have asked ourselves this in our time. First, *believe in yourself*. Read the novel through quickly, then read it again more slowly, giving thought to some of the questions outlined above. Only after this stage should you turn to the critics. You may then find that some of your own ideas about the book have been corroborated and this may suggest that you are working on the right lines. You may also find that other ideas you have had are in disagreement with the critic you are reading. Accept that you may be wrong but do not be afraid to suspect that the critic may be wrong. Go back to the text; it is the final arbiter; does it appear to support your argument or the critic's argument? Never try to defend an indefensible position. If you cannot prove your contention, give in gracefully; however, if you still feel you are proved right, do not allow yourself to be bullied by the printed word. Any teacher worth

his or her salt learns a lot from students; every critic is vulnerable. Enjoy your novel-reading and go on reading more novels. You may well find that in the process you have yourself become a critic.