

## E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* : A Critical Approach

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**Abstract.** E. M. Forster was a novelist, essayist and critic. He was educated at Tonbridge School and King's College, Cambridge. Later on, he was made an honorary fellow of the University. While at Cambridge he developed contacts and got himself associated with Bloomsbury Group. He travelled in Europe, lived in Italy and Egypt and spent some years in India as a secretary to an Indian State King after the First World War. *The Longest Journey* like Shelley's *Epipsychidion* is an attempt to analyse 'the thing', and the story of the search, self-understanding of man, for subsequent understanding of man's place in the cosmic scheme. The three parts of the novel—Cambridge, Sawston and Wiltshire signify three distinct ways of life. Cambridge stands for chivalrous enthusiasm, Sawston for pragmatism, and Wiltshire for plain blunt sincerity.

**Keywords:** Cambridge; Sawston; Wiltshire; self-understanding; pragmatism; emotions; feelings.

E.M. Forster was born in January, 1879 in London. His father was a professional man and architect of reputable standing and his mother had been brought up in an intellectually oriented middle class family. From early days he showed his keen interest in books which made him contemplative and alienated from robust physical life. After having graduated from Cambridge in 1901, he visited Greece and Italy, the seat of classical civilization. In 1905 when he was twenty-five, his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* was published. It has a precise, beautifully-rounded story, rich in understanding of human nature, spiritual values and the beautiful description of Italy. It was the most creative decade of his career as a novelist. *The Longest Journey* (1907) is the story of his own upbringing and school days. *A Room with a View* (1908) is a charming story of the effect of Italy on two women; and *Howards End* (1910) is Forster's most ambitious attempt to characterise the malady of modern England. They were published along with a collection of short stories, in *The Celestial Omnibus*. (1911)

*The Longest Journey* is divided into two parts that show the conflict between convention and nature. It is a novel of friendship and of a bitterly unhappy marriage of falsehood and shame and of the good life. The first part "Cambridge" begins symbolically with an undergraduate's discussion on the nature of reality. The undergraduates discuss whether the cow is real or not and the discussion takes place in the room of Rickie Elliot, a somewhat neurotic Shelleyan idealist, who has a touch of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and a little of Maugham's Philip Carey *Of*

*Human Bondage*. Rickie is in danger of destruction by the deadly forces of convention. He marries Agnes Pembroke, a practical girl, who worships money and worldly success more than emotion and love. Rickie is unhappy in his life for his wife, Agnes is not to his liking. To find relief, Rickie becomes a school-master under the aegis of his brother-in-law, Herbert, who also worships success like his sister Agnes. Rickie chafes under the domination of Agnes and Herbert and escapes for a while to 'Wiltshire'. He is rescued from his despair by Stephen, his half-brother, illegitimate son of the dead mother whom he had long idealised. Under his inspiration he feels that he had journeyed till he stood behind right and wrong. Just before the novel reaches the end of the long journey, Rickie knows for certain that conventions are not majestic, and that they will not claim us in the end. But ironically enough, Stephen from whom Rickie had learned so much, starts drinking and shatters Rickie's faith. Rickie once again falls on sombre vein and life seems to have no meaning for him. Rickie meets his end in a pitiable way. He is struck to his death by a train in the act of rescuing the drunken Stephen.

The above outline is an attempt as a short story of *The Longest Journey* but if we critically evaluate, we can find some specific aspects which help us to do it effectively. *The Longest Journey* was repeatedly asserted by Forster as one of his favourite novels. It was written just after he did his B.A. from Cambridge, like Rickie Elliot, the hero. Like him, Forster too, suffers the dilemma of a young man who after his graduation finds the world much bigger than he had imagined during the college-days. Naturally this novel tends to be autobiographical.

Rickie Elliot, the hero of *The Longest Journey* oscillates between ascetic values and human needs. But he can neither renounce life nor can he be fully committed to it. Rickie must avoid asceticism and yet he must also be aware of the limitations of everyday life. He must, therefore, make a longer journey to connect the life of the mind with the life of the body. This novel inaugurates the great tradition of triad thinking. It opens with a philosophical dimension of the discussion of the nature of reality. The point under discussion is – Do things have an objective existence of their own? Or do they exist in the eye of the beholder? This becomes the theme of the novel. Rickie's disinterestedness becomes obvious in the beginning. When 'cow' is being discussed, Rickie's imagination insists on painting. The scene is interrupted by the sudden arrival of Herbert Renbrook, a family acquaintance and a master of suburban school with his sister Agnes. Rickie is able to mark a majestic glow in her and in a mood of gusto, he declares a philanthropic attitude and cries that he hates no one. One of his friends Ansell reminds him of his father and says, "Not even your father?" (*Where Angels Fear to Tread* 1999 : 242) This question causes some sort of chemical reaction on his being and after a brief silence.

Rickie's father was a man of the world. He was devoid of jollity and generosity. He was a man of insignificance. He regulated his life by status symbols.

When he found his wife was not qualified, he thought of parting company and taking a room in London. Mr. Elliot was lame; so was his sister Mrs. Elimy Failing, and so was his son Rickie. The word 'Rickie' stands for Rickety. It is an epithet. Mr. Elliot has no feeling for his own son. Rickie's malady was not worse than that of his own. So Rickie spent his time with his mother and Mr Elliot spent his time in London, until illness compelled a retreat from the metropolitan pleasure, and he was obliged to return to his wife. His first task was to order his son out to a public school, notwithstanding the fact that the experience would be humiliating to a boy of his deformity. Then Mr. Elliot died, and just when Mrs. Elliot was planning a new life with her son, the end came for her as well.

Thus, Cambridge becomes his school and home. In his spare time Rickie had been writing stories, hoping like his creator, to make a living from literature. His stories are not successful. Herbert Pembroke offers the job of schoolmaster to Rickie and although Rickie's vocation does not lie that way, he accepts it. The symbolic moment has passed. Rickie now is married to Agnes and is settled as a schoolmaster in Sawston. The second phase of the novel now begins. Swaston, which emphasises organisation above creation and success, above all else, is the direct antithesis of Cambridge. Rickie finds himself in a materialistic cesspool, increasingly dominated by his wife and gradually abandoned by his Cambridge friends.

The symbolic moment has passed. From now on Rickie's attitude is one of increasing distastes. Stephen is the symbol of a hated father, and he (not Rickie, who is mother's boy) will contribute to the stream of generations. Rickie's daughter was born lame and died soon after birth. Meanwhile Stephen passes his carefree days riding in the fields of Wiltshire, bathing in the rivers, drinking with the tramps and when the worse for alcohol, smashing aunt Emily's windows. Meanwhile Rickie passes his days in apathy gradually becoming aware that Agne's interest in Aunt Emily's money is at the bottom of her reluctance to disclose his parentage to Stephen. Meanwhile Ansell who has chosen to alienate himself from Rickie, comes to Sawston and before a packed dining-hall of students, masters and prefects, reveals that Stephen is the son of Rickie's mother.

Once again Rickie collapses. But on recovery, he decides to cast his lot with Stephen, for was he not the symbol of an adored mother? Stephen who is a bastard and possesses the bastard's reckless indifference to ancestry, is disgusted at Rickie's attitude—his philosophy being "here I am and there are you." However, they set out with Ansell and Rickie catches up on his neglected practice of writing. One weekend he visits Aunt Emily again, and in trying to rescue drunken Stephen from an approaching train, is himself run over by it.

The last chapter sees Stephen established in Wiltshire with his wife and his child, after having secured the publication of Rickie's stories. The Pembrokes are exposed, as Stephen catches Herbert trying to cast him out of his share from Rickie's royalties. And the book ends with Stephen surveying the Wiltshire downs, with humility, in gratitude to Rickie whose spirit had bequeathed him salvation.

The three parts of the novel – Cambridge, Sawston, and Wiltshire signify three distinct ways of life. Cambridge stands for chivalrous enthusiasm, Sawston for pragmatism, and Wiltshire for plain blunt sincerity. If Rickie is Cambridge, then Herbert is Sawston, and Stephen, Wiltshire.

Forster's Stephen suggests an unmistakable likeness to them. We have seen that Cambridge and Sawston alike were drenched in illusion—an illusion that grew from a disproportional feeling. Rickie stood too near to his family life; Herbert was incapable of the aesthetic distance between his inner 'self' and himself. A syllogistic reasoning would be baffled by their contradictions, but imagination could unravel the underlying unity.

As against these embarrassments of association and excess, we have a third dimension—which looks a man straight in the face to say, "Here I am, there are you". Being a bastard he (Stephen) has no association to glorify or denigrate. When Rickie offers to throw his fortunes with him in the name of their mother, he flares up:

I see your game. You don't care about me drinking or to shake my hand. It's someone else you want to cure—as it were that old photograph. You talk to me, but all the time you look at the Photograph. He snatched it up. I've my own idea of good manners and to look friends between the eyes is one of them; and this—he tore the photograph across and this—he tore it again—and these—he flung the pieces at the man. (*The Longest Journey* 2001 : 254-55)

Life implies the ability to create life. In a biological sense, it suggests the power to have children (to Stephen is given a child, to whom he gives the name of their mother). In an imaginative sense, it suggests the ability to create a work of art. It is only by coming in contact with Stephen that Ansell completes his dissertation and Rickie publishes his stories. Now Stephen had one instinct that often troubled him :

At night—especially out of doors—it seemed rather strange that he was alive. The dry grass pricked his checks, the fields were invisible and mute, and

here was he throwing stones at the darkness or smoking a pipe ... He was proud of his good circulation and in the morning it seemed quite natural. But at night—why should there be this difference between him and the acres of land, that cooled all round him until the sun returned? (240)

Why indeed ? Because the creative mind works when the city is asleep. It is in that serene and blessed mood that a man casts a pebble into the sea, and watches rings upon rings of thought widening and smoothening into infinity. It may be recalled that Keats's "Hyperion", dealing with a similar problem is attended by the imagery of silence. And it may be recalled how Widdrington described a particularly 'stony' meal at Sawston as one, where "no one stopped talking for a moment." It is in the silence of the night, as his daughter is asleep on the open down, that Stephen works out the mystery of existence. Nothing in experience has been wasted. If he has given Rickie the inspiration to do the work for which he was designed, then the responsibility of being Rickie's inspiration has turned him (Stephen) from worthless company to higher things. If Stephen had shown Rickie the way, it was Rickie's magnanimity that had saved Stephen's life, and turned him—an accident—into a purposeful design. If Rickie has disowned the spirit of Life, that was Stephen, he has stoned for it by giving up his life. Thus, in the making of Stephen, Rickie plays a part, as in the making of Rickie, his father, mother, the Pembroke's all had played a part. Thus can the humanist norm evolve, which is what Epipsychidion is about; in the novels that followed, Forster concerned himself with the application of it.

This novel has an exclusively English background. In many respects, it is most personal and autobiographical. The tripartite structure of the novel—'Cambridge', 'Sawston' and 'Wiltshire' are the contrasted worlds of values. For example, Sawston represents all that was wrong with England whereas Cambridge stands for all that was good. The novelist contemplates the blessings and the blemishes of romanticism. It has been said by the critics of Forster : this novel of Forster reveals at once both the merits and weaknesses of the novelist. His weaknesses arise from the fact that the art values with which he comes forward are not in harmony with life. But the novelist's strength lies in his conceptual imagination and visionary power with which he tries to round up the novel.

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