

from *Aspects of the Novel* (1927)

By E.M. Forster¹ (England)

DIRECTIONS: Read the selection and answer the embedded questions on a separate sheet of paper. Each answer should be approximately a paragraph. More than that is overkill. This is due Monday 9/10 before midnight.

We may divide characters into flat and round.

Flat characters were called "humorous" in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round. The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as "I never will desert Mr. Micawber". There is Mrs. Micawber²-- she says she won't desert Mr. Micawber; she doesn't, and there she is. Or: "I must conceal, even by subterfuges, the poverty of my master's house." There is Caleb Balderstone³ in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. He does not use the actual phrase, but it completely describes him; he

has no existence outside it, no pleasures, none of the private lusts and aches that must complicate the most consistent of servitors. Whatever he does, wherever he goes, whatever lies he tells or plates he breaks, it is to conceal the poverty of his master's house. It is not his *idée fixe*⁴, because there is nothing in him into which the idea can be fixed. He is the idea, and such



Edward Morgan Forster
1879-1970

¹ Forster himself was a major 20th Century novelist-- author of *Room with a View*, *Howard's End*, and *Passage to India* (among others)

² Mr. and Mrs. Micawber are comic characters in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850).

³ 1819 novel by Sir Walter Scott, seldom read today

⁴ French: fixed idea; an idea that dominates one's mind, especially for a prolonged period; an obsession

life as he possesses radiates from its edges and from the scintillations it strikes when other elements in the novel impinge...

One great advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognized whenever they come in-- recognized by the reader's emotional eye, not by the visual eye, which merely notes the recurrence of a proper name. In Russian novels, where they so seldom occur, they would be a decided help. It is a convenience for an author when he can strike with his full force at once, and flat characters are very useful to him, since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere-- little luminous disks of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars; most satisfactory. A second advantage is that they are easily remembered by the reader afterwards. They remain in his mind as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they moved through circumstances, which gives them in retrospect a comforting quality, and preserves them when the book that produced them may decay. The Countess in *Evan Harrington*⁵ furnishes a good little example here. Let us compare our memories of her with our memories of Becky Sharp. We do not remember what the Countess did or what she passed through. What is clear is her figure and the formula that surrounds it, namely, "Proud as we are of dear papa, we must conceal his memory." All her rich humour proceeds from this. She is a flat character. Becky is round. She, too, is on the make, but she cannot be summed up in a single phrase, and we remember her in connection with the great scenes through which she passed and as modified by those scenes-- that is to say, we do not remember her so easily because she waxes and wanes and has facets like a human being. All of us, even the sophisticated, yearn for permanence, and to the unsophisticated permanence is the chief excuse for a work of art. We all want books to endure, to be refuges, and their inhabitants to be always the same, and flat characters tend to justify themselves on this account.

All the same, critics who have their eyes fixed severely upon daily life-- as were our eyes last week-- have very little patience with such renderings of human nature. Queen Victoria, they argue,

1. Forster obviously writes from the perspective of a novelist and reader. When he says, "In Russian novels, where they so seldom occur, they would be a decided help," in what sense does he mean this? Explain.

2. From a psychological point of view, why would a flat character be more memorable than a round one? Explain why this would be true using a contemporary film or television character.

⁵ 1861 novel by George Meredith, seldom read today

cannot be summed up in a single sentence, so what excuse remains for Mrs. Micawber? One of our foremost writers, Mr. Norman Douglas⁶, is a critic of this type, and the passage from him which I will quote puts the case against flat characters in a forcible fashion. The passage occurs in an open letter to D. H. Lawrence⁷, with whom he is quarrelling: a doughty pair of combatants, the hardness of whose hitting make the rest of us feel like a lot of ladies up in a pavilion. He complains that Lawrence, in a biography of a mutual friend, has falsified the picture by employing "the novelist's touch", and he goes on to define what this is:

It consists, I should say, in a failure to realize the profundities and complexities of the ordinary human mind; it selects for literary purposes two or three frets of a man or woman, generally the most spectacular and therefore 'useful' ingredients of their character, and disregards all the others. Whatever fails to fit in with these specially chosen traits is eliminated; must be eliminated, for otherwise the description would not hold water. Such and such are the data; everything incompatible with those data has to go by the board. It follows that the novelist's touch argues, often logically, from a wrong premise; it takes what it likes and leaves the rest. The facets may be correct as far as they go, but there are too few of them; what the author says may be true, and yet by no means the truth. That is the novelist's touch. It falsifies life.

Well, the novelist's touch as thus defined is, of course, bad in biography, for no human being is simple. But in a novel it has its place: a novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round, and the outcome of their collisions parallels life more accurately than Mr. Douglas implies. The case of Dickens is significant. Dickens's⁸ people are nearly all flat (Pip and David Copperfield⁹ attempt roundness, but so diffidently that they seem more like bubbles than solids). Nearly every one can

3. This section seems paradoxical, since one would think that it is the writer's job to create rounded, fully developed characters, not flat characters reduced to one or two chief characteristics. How could the creation of both round and flat characters be an essential part of a writer's craft? Explain.

⁶ Norman Douglas (1868-1952): minor English novelist, best remembered today for his 1917 *South Wind*

⁷ D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930): major English novelist of the 20th Century

⁸ Charles Dickens (1812-1870): major (one is tempted to say *the* major) English writer of the 19th Century

be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own. It is a conjuring-trick; at any moment we may look at Mr. Pickwick¹⁰ edgeways and find him no thicker than a gramophone record. But we never get the sideway view. Mr. Pickwick is far too adroit and well-trained. He always has the air of weighing something, and when he is put into the cupboard of the young ladies' school he seems as heavy as Falstaff in the buck-basket at Windsor¹¹. Part of the genius of Dickens is that he does use types and caricatures, people whom we recognize the instant they re-enter, and yet achieves effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow. Those who dislike Dickens have an excellent case. He ought to be bad. He is actually one of our big writers, and his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit...

The part of their novel that is alive galvanizes the part that is not, and causes the characters to jump about and speak in a convincing way. They are quite different from the perfect novelist who touches all his material directly, who seems to pass the creative finger down every sentence and into every word. Richardson¹², Defoe¹³, Jane Austen¹⁴, are perfect in this particular way; their work may not be great but their hands are always upon it; there is not the tiny interval between the touching of the button and the sound of the bell which occurs in novels where the characters are not under direct control. For we must admit that flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones, and also that they are best when they are comic. A serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore. Each time he enters

⁹ the main characters in *Great Expectations* (1861) and *David Copperfield* (1850) respectively; Forster is somewhat patronizing of Dickens throughout, but though he accuses of him of writing flat characters more forcibly than most, this has been a persistent criticism of Dickens since his own time, particularly with his minor characters

¹⁰ main character of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837), more commonly known as *The Pickwick Papers*

¹¹ A reference to a scene in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; Falstaff is a character in three of Shakespeare's plays and is a fat, vain, boastful, and cowardly knight

¹² Samuel Richardson (1689-1761): a major 18th Century English writer, more important for his pioneering work in the form of the novel than for his actual writings (which are seldom read today outside of History of the Novel classes)

¹³ Daniel Defoe (ca. 1660-1731): a major 18th Century English writer; his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is often cited as the first truly important English novel

¹⁴ Jane Austen (1775-1817): major English novelist of the early 19th Century; Forster is slightly patronizing (most probably because she was a female writer), but such attitudes were very common prior to emergence of the Feminist Movement; one often reads pre-mid 20th Century descriptions of her as very, very good, but somehow denied the first rank for one reason or the other; today she has joined Dickens as one of the two mostly widely read and taught English novelists of the 19th Century

crying "Revenge!" or "My heart bleeds for humanity!" or whatever his formula is, our hearts sink. One of the romances of a popular contemporary writer is constructed round a Sussex farmer who says, "I'll plough up that bit of gorse." There is the farmer, there is the gorse; he says he'll plough it up, he does plough it up, but it is not like saying "I'll never desert Mr. Micawber," because we

4. If flat characters tend to boring if they are meant to be taken seriously, how could the opposite be true if they serve a comedic function? Explain using a contemporary film or television character as an example.

are so bored by his consistency that we do not care whether he succeeds with the goal or fails. If his formula were analysed and connected up with the rest of the human outfit, we should not be bored any longer, the formula would cease to be the man and become an obsession in the man; that is to say he would have turned from a flat fanner into a round one. It is only round people who are fit to perform tragically for any length of time and can move us to any feelings except humour and appropriateness.

So now let us desert these two-dimensional people, and, by way of transition to the round, let us go to *Mansfield Park*¹⁵, and look at Lady Bertram, sitting on her sofa with pug. Pug is flat, like most animals in fiction. He is once represented as straying into a rose-bed in a cardboard kind of way, but that is all, and during most of the book his mistress seems to be cut out of the same simple material as her dog. Lady Bertram's formula is, "I am kindly, but must not be fatigued", and she functions out of it. But at the end there is a catastrophe. Her two daughters come to grief-- to the worst grief known to Miss Austen's universe, far worse than the Napoleonic wars. Julia elopes; Maria, who is unhappily married, runs off with a lover. What is Lady Bertram's reaction? The sentence describing it is significant:

Lady Bertram did not think deeply, but, guided by Sir Thomas, she thought justly on all important points; and she saw, therefore, in all its enormity, what had happened, and neither endeavoured herself, nor required Fanny to advise her, to think little of guilt and infamy.

These are strong words, and they used to worry me because I thought Jane Austen's moral sense was getting out of hand. She may, and of course does, deprecate guilt and infamy herself, and she duly causes all possible distress in the minds of Edmund and Fanny, but has she any right to agitate calm, consistent Lady Bertram? Is not it like giving pug three faces and setting him to guard the gates of Hell? Ought not her ladyship to remain on the sofa saying,

¹⁵ 1814 novel by Jane Austen

"This is a dreadful and sadly exhausting business about Julia and Maria, but where is Fanny gone? I have dropped another stitch"?

I used to think this, through misunderstanding Jane Austen's method-- exactly as Scott¹⁶ misunderstood it when he congratulated her for painting on a square of ivory. She is a miniaturist¹⁷, but never two-dimensional. All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity. Even Miss Bates has a mind, even Elizabeth Elliot a heart, and Lady Bertram's moral fervour ceases to vex us when we realize this; the disc has suddenly extended and become a little globe. When the novel is closed, Lady Bertram goes back to the flat, it is true; the dominant impression she leaves can be summed up in a formula. But that is not how Jane Austen conceived her, and the freshness of her reappearances is due to this. Why do the characters in Jane Austen give us a slightly new pleasure each time they come in, as opposed to the merely repetitive

pleasure that is caused by a character in Dickens? Why do they combine so well in a conversation, and draw one another out without seeming to do so, and never perform? The answer to this question can be put in several ways: that, unlike Dickens, she was a real artist, that she never stooped to caricature, etc. But the best reply is that her characters though smaller than his, are more highly organized. They function all round, and even if her plot made greater demands on them than it does they would still be adequate...

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it-- life within the pages of a book. And by using it sometimes alone, more often in combination with the other kind, the novelist achieves his task of acclimatization, and harmonizes the human race with the other aspects of his work.

5. Forster's discussion of Lady Bertram raises an interesting idea: that a character can be both round and flat dependent upon what is happening in a narrative. Think like a writer and explain why an author might wish to do this using a contemporary television or film as an example.

¹⁶ Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832): major Scottish novelist, most remembered today for his 1819 *Ivanhoe*

¹⁷ called so by Scott and Forster because she wrote domestic novels about what were traditional womens' concerns (and very much from a woman's point of view)