

Speaking the Unspeakable:
Victorian Sexual Norms' Relation to Class in Forster's *Maurice*
by Karen Rustad

British Victorian society notoriously concealed all signs of sex. In bourgeois communities, women hid their bodies under layers and layers of corsets, petticoats, and ornate dresses. Everyone in the family had a bedroom of his or her own, even husbands and wives. Sexual education hardly existed. However, despite the prudishness of Victorian British society, detailed study of working class citizens' sex lives did take place. Victorian aid workers, law enforcement, and other representatives of the bourgeoisie frequently ventured into the vast slums of London to record the "promiscuity" of working class life (Barret-DuCrocq). In such studies, the bourgeois could speak the unspeakable—as long as the discussion applied only to the working class. By reaffirming upper class moral superiority and establishing a rescuer ethic, discussion of sexuality within this limited context actually promoted upper-class mores and entrenched contemporary power structures (Aisenberg).

Ample evidence of extensive homosexual prostitution also exists, particularly in the British working class neighborhoods of Soho and St. George's (Kaplan). Although the gentlemen clients are largely nameless, this evidence clearly demonstrates bourgeois hypocrisy and immorality. Yet these records still exist. Perhaps the implication of the bourgeoisie in Victorian London's burgeoning sex trade remains marginally acceptable because it still positions the upper class in a superior, powerful position over the masses, even if moral superiority falls by the wayside. Thus, the only truly "unspeakable" ideas in Victorian society would therefore be those that violate both bourgeois moral norms and Victorian class inequality.

In E. M. Forster's novel *Maurice*, we see Victorian society's response to the flagrant violation of these norms through queer liaisons conducted on equal footing. Homosexual

relationships between two members of the bourgeoisie are “rot”; nonexploitative relationships conducted across class lines earn a flabbergasted “whimper of disgust” (Forster 58. 243). These types of relationships are conspicuously absent from the historical record; only through fiction are they introduced into the public discourse. *Maurice* displays the consequences of such “unspeakable” queer liaisons, demonstrating both the power of upper-class Victorian social norms and the possibility of rebellion against them.

Part One: Making and Maintaining Victorian Morality

British bourgeois norms prohibiting homosexuality developed from three main influences. First was the aristocracy’s taboo against extramarital sex. Despite having to share its privileged status with capitalism’s *nouveau riche*, the old nobility was still a significant social force in Victorian Britain. Extramarital sex posed a problem for the bloodline-based nobility because illegitimate children could complicate the inheritance of nobles’ estates. While this problem only arose from the complications of heterosexual intercourse, the social taboo could easily expand to apply to all sexual relations not enshrined in matrimony.

Second, Victorian Britain was a primarily Christian nation, which had recently undergone a major religious revival via the work of Methodist minister John Wesleyan (Karlen 164). British ethics demanded a neo-Puritanical “life of toil, from which the virtuous take repose only in the form of Sunday prayer and meditation” (Barret-DuCrocq 14, Karlen 164). “Taking repose” in sexuality was seen as an impediment to spiritual growth as it improperly prioritized wild “passions” over the serenity of the soul. This was especially true in the case of homosexuality, being specially prohibited by several Bible passages in the books of Leviticus and Romans.

Finally, the imperial culture of Victorian England required a tightly confined, heterosexual norm. At the time of Maurice's writing, America's superior economic strength, the Boer War, and a unified Germany were challenging Britain's hegemony (Bailey 331-2). Britain needed a skilled and unified middle class to produce, as Lord Curzon observed, "governors and administrators and judges ...teachers and preachers and lawyers" (qtd in Said 213, qtd. in Bailey 329) in order to control its massive colonial holdings. Thus, members of the middle class were forced to conform to a series of strict societal expectations, as Maurice's experience demonstrates:

Maurice is constantly pressured to... be a "good citizen," [Forster 11] "brave," [11] and "sympathetic" [14]. From his prep school master...he learns the lessons of love: to be "chaste with asceticism" [14] and to strive for the "love [of] a noble woman, to protect and serve her" [14]. (Bailey 334)

All members of Victorian bourgeois society were expected to be calm and dutiful, even to the exclusion of emotion, and to produce another generation of future imperialist bureaucrats, even to the exclusion of homosexual leanings. These three dynamics reinforced Victorian England's profound homophobia.

The contrast between Victorian sexual norms and working class reality strengthened bourgeois identity and moral authority. The social workers who studied London's working class rarely examined the reasons why poverty was so widespread; they merely recorded the consequences of poverty itself. Lacking a basis for understanding, they held the working class to bourgeois social and moral norms—and, seeing that working class women did not wear the lavish layers of clothing bourgeois women did and that the one or two rooms allotted per working class family were much lower quality than the bourgeoisie's housing, the slums appeared to be havens of "sin": "Vice and wretchedness exist in their most appalling and hideous forms, stalking about with bold front, unblushingly, as though vice were virtue" (Weylland 49,

qtd. in Barret-DuCrocq 9). By holding the working class to standards that only the upper class could ever fulfill, these studies affirmed the moral superiority of the bourgeoisie.

The poverty studies also maintained the upper class' identity by supporting its "rescuer ethic." In order for the bourgeoisie to justify its existence as a "light upon a hill" for the depraved classes, the lower class had to stay sinful, a dynamic reflected at the time also in imperial Britain's relationship with its colonies (Aisenberg, Bailey). By portraying the lower classes as desperately in need of moral assistance from above, the bourgeoisie could paint itself as the working class' savior. In *Maurice*, this rescuer ethic comes into effect when Clive learns that Maurice plans to give up his upper class life and continue his relationship with the gamekeeper Alec. Clive knows that interfering with Maurice and Alec's relationship might "ruin him" if word got out about it (Forster 245). However, as he ponders how to silence Alec and erase the incident, he feels little fear; instead, "[a] feeling of heroism [steals] over him" (245). By imposing his sexual norms on Maurice and Alec, Clive strengthens his assumed heterosexual identity and moral superiority.

Although indulging in male prostitution risked bourgeois moral authority, it was still marginally accepted within the bounds of Victorian class power structure. Although "it takes two" to make a homosexual liaison, the asymmetric power relationship found in the act of hiring prostitute caused most of the "sin" to fall on the prostitute's head; the working-class man was "selling himself" and had to follow orders, whether he liked it or not. The bourgeois gentleman, on the other hand, was merely a customer possessing the money necessary to seek his own pleasure. The prostitute was merely a secret servant of the gentleman, just as working class men were openly seen serving the bourgeois everywhere else in society.

This acceptability, however, was still conditioned on the understanding that the bourgeois client was faceless, unknown, and thus could not enable any strong moral indictment against the upper class even as it entrenched the class power structure. Thus, we see a panicked reaction in the government and media when the gentleman patrons of male brothels happened to stumble into the spotlight. When the police busted a Cleveland Street gay brothel in 1889, the brothel's procurer unexpectedly named three noblemen as customers: Lord Arthur Somerset, Earl of Easton, and a third man. Afraid to charge members of the upper class with homosexuality, the police pushed the case on to the Director of Public Prosecutions Sir Augustus Stephenson, who took the case "with great reluctance" (Fisher 41-2). The case bounced between five different bureaucrats before the Lord Chancellor concluded that there was not enough evidence to prosecute, clashing with Scotland Yard and several law officers (42). The delays incurred by this process were such that Somerset successfully fled the country. One contemporary onlooker even alleged that the delay was not a simple case of bureaucratic panic, but was one of several measures deliberately intended to allow the bourgeois class to get off easily:

Labouchere alleged that the cabinet had attempted to hush up the scandal. Specifically, he alleged...that Newlove and Veck [the brothel's leaders] had received unusually light sentences to buy their silence in respect of the clients at Cleveland Street... (Fisher 42).

Whether or not the individual bureaucrats had intended to get their upper-class brethren off the hook, it is clear that Victorian society, shaped around class and moral power structures that privileged the bourgeoisie, tended to silence or smooth over any tales that did not fit those power structures because it could not understand them. Thus, while it was clearly permissible for matters of sexuality of the general public to be recorded, evidence that would put the upper class' status at risk was almost literally unspeakable.

Part Two: Discussing the Unspeakable

“I’m an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort.”
At last judgement [sic] came. He could scarcely believe his ears. It was
“Rubbish, rubbish!” He had expected many things, but not this; for if his
words were rubbish his life was a dream. ...
“Who put that lie into your head? You whom I see and know to be a
decent fellow! We’ll never mention it again. No—I’ll not discuss. I’ll not
discuss. The worst thing I could do for you is discuss it.” (Forster 159)

Despite the detailed study of working class promiscuity and gay prostitutes, the historical record says almost nothing of homosexual relationships between members of the bourgeoisie. We see only one well-known bourgeois-bourgeois gay relationship: that between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, and that only because Wilde himself pursued a libel lawsuit regarding his homosexuality (Kaplan). Even a fictional account of Victorian bourgeois homosexuality, *Maurice*, could not be published until the 1970s, long after the Victorian era faded to a close.

This odd silence can be explained because in Victorian society homosexual relationships between members of the bourgeoisie were not merely immoral acts to be vocally condemned. Bourgeois homosexuality went a level beyond immorality: incomprehensibility. It was “rubbish” and thus a truly “unspeakable” phenomenon. Relationships between gentlemen, without any working class figure involved on which to pin the blame, jeopardized upper class moral authority without any reinforcement of bourgeois class power. Thus, if a gentleman’s homosexuality were discovered, he would become the greatest of outcasts—not only untouchable, but also unspeakable. He would not exist.

Victorian society also contained structural barriers that made long-term relationships between bourgeois gentlemen nearly impossible. In *Maurice*, Clive and Maurice’s relationship is initially made possible by Oxford’s unique homosocial environment. As a residential college for young men, Oxford gives Maurice and Clive the freedom to spend time together and pursue a

relationship without much danger of suspicion. After Clive and Maurice leave school, however, societal expectations strain their relationship, eventually to the breaking point. In the “real world” of bourgeois British society, there is no place for two bachelors to live together in the long-term; men are expected to eventually marry and start a family. Maurice feels guilty that he will “tread out” the “torch” of family lineage passed down by his parents and feels his “sterility” is a “shame” (97). However, while Maurice accepts this as the natural consequence of his homosexuality, Clive is incapable of at all questioning the societal expectation of having children:

“These children will be a nuisance,” he [Clive] remarked during a canter.
“What children?”
“Mine! The need of an heir for Penge [Clive’s family’s estate]. My mother calls it marriage, but that was all she was thinking of.” (96)

Constantly pestered about girls by his mother, Clive comes to believe that he must marry a woman and father children. The societal expectation for British men to have a family is so strong that Clive thinks he has no choice in the matter—and, by taking marriage’s inevitability for granted, he destroys the possibility of creating a choice for himself. Eventually Clive’s desire for “respectability” leads to his break up with Maurice and marriage to Anne (245). Although Clive still cares for Maurice “a little bit,” Victorian bourgeois norms cause him to follow social custom and “hang [his life]” and social prospects on creating a conventional, heterosexual life (245). In this aspect, therefore, *Maurice* rebels against Victorian sexual norms in that it tells the story of a homosexual relationship between bourgeois men; however, the novel ultimately affirms the power of those norms’ since Maurice and Clive’s relationship ends unhappily.

The other conspicuous gap in the Victorian sexual record is homosexual relationships across class lines with symmetric power dynamics. The bourgeois believed the working class to be inferior morally; as Clive remarks about his servants, “You can’t expect our standard of

honesty in servants, any more than you can expect loyalty or gratitude” (205). Thus, it was assumed that any compromising cross-class sexual liaison would likely result in blackmail. Both Maurice and Clive make this assumption about Alec. Maurice questions Clive about Alec’s ethics and despairs that Alec is the son of a butcher and “a little too smart to be straight [honest]” (205). Convinced that Alec plans to blackmail him, Maurice refuses to answer his letters in order to minimize the evidence of any relationship between them. Clive’s immediate reaction to news of Alec and Maurice’s relationship is one of dumb horror, finding the prospect of a relationship between classes incomprehensible (243). His second response, however, is to wonder whether Alec “would prove extortionate” as Clive plans to help Maurice silence Alec (245). The only conception of a cross-class relationship they have is one of asymmetric power, either of a lord over a servant or a gentleman brought to his knees by blackmail.

Maurice breaks these entrenched stereotypes as Alec and Maurice’s relationship ends victorious over the Victorian mores that constrain the two lovers. While Alec does play the power card in his third, frustrated letter to Maurice—hoping that “I know about you and Clive” would finally break Maurice’s silence—his subsequent actions reveal an attempt to build a relationship with Maurice on equal footing. Without any assurances from Maurice, Alec sacrifices his career prospects by skipping out on emigrating to Buenos Aires with his family in order that he and Maurice can be together. Maurice replies to this token of faith favorably, willingly sacrificing his social status for his relationship with Alec. As each party gives up something dear, Alec and Maurice develop a relationship that transcends class boundaries, where they meet as interdependent individuals with equal shares.

In a sense, Victorian upper-class mores still hold power at the end of the novel. Maurice is erased from bourgeois society as noiselessly as he disappears from Clive’s room at the end of

the book. Bourgeois sexual norms exact from Maurice the cost of rebellion: being made an outcast. Maurice's true victory over repressive bourgeois morality, however, is found in his willingness to take on that cost. He is willing to accept the consequences of breaking society's sexual and economic bounds for the sake of his love for Alec and his identity as a homosexual man.

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