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**“WE MURDER TO DISSECT”: ENJOYMENT OF BEAUTY  
VERSUS THEORETICAL RIGOUR IN ZADIE SMITH’S  
*ON BEAUTY***

**Abstract**

The article discusses how Zadie Smith’s inspiration by E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* (1910) and Elaine Scarry’s essay “On Beauty and Being Just” (1998) contributed to her ethical vision in her third novel, *On Beauty* (2005). Her characters are tested according to their ability to respond to different forms of beauty, which is a measure of their ability to respond to other human beings. The paper also explores how E.M. Forster’s motto (“only connect”) is expanded in the novel to include people of different classes, cultures and ethnicities and how his criticism of moral blindness is reflected in her enactments of some of its contemporary manifestations in the world of academia.

**Key words**

*Music; painting; beauty; ideology; human relationships; to connect*

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In her essay on E.M. Forster, written during the gestation period of her third novel, *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith invokes the moral philosophers, Gilbert Ryle and Martha Nussbaum, to support her idea – contrary to her previous theoretical beliefs based on poststructuralism – that there are ways in which “fiction enters into the ethical realm” (Smith 2003: 2). She further demonstrates Forster’s innovative connection of his style and ethics. Applying Keats’s concept of Negative Capability to the characters “being in uncertainties,” she shows that Forster’s very style of writing, his narrative structure – in correspondence with such a conception of character – is also meandering rather than controlled and rational (Smith 2003: 4). Forster is empathetic to his “muddled” characters whom he contrasts in his fiction with characters which are “too consistent,” “morally inflexible” and inca-

pable of proper human involvement (Smith 2003: 3). This last point shows that in *On Beauty*, which she professes to be her *hommage* to Forster, she is indebted to him for much more than the obvious intertextuality: the scaffolding of her plot, the melodramatic coincidences and some of the turns of phrase.

As part of the twenty-first century expansion of the central issues of *Howards End*, Zadie Smith embraces the genre of the campus novel in this transatlantic fiction inspired by her visiting fellowship at Harvard University. In one of the many melodramatic coincidences characteristic of E.M. Forster (but also of the campus novel) Jerome Belsey, the elder son of Howard Belsey, the white, British professor of art history at Wellington liberal arts college, a fictitious East Coast university near Boston, (loosely based on Harvard), is, during his internship in London, offered lodgings in the house of his father's ideological enemy, Professor Monty Kipps. The sexually inexperienced Jerome falls not only for Monty's beautiful daughter, Victoria, but also for the whole conservative lifestyle and religion of the family. At the very beginning of the novel Jerome conveys his feelings and observations in a series of emails to his father, very much like Helen Schlegel in *Howards End* who writes a series of letters to her family while staying with the Wilcoxes at Howards End.

Yet, the ideological polarity between Howard Belsey and the right-wing Sir Monty Kipps, originally from Trinidad, is somewhat different from that between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. Howard Belsey considers himself to be liberal, yet his myopic, uncritical immersion in poststructuralist theory and his extremely negative attitude to representational art lead to his inability to appreciate beauty either in art or in life and, as a consequence – as with Forster's morally blind characters – to his inability to achieve proper human involvement, i.e. to connect.

By contrast, Howard's Afro-American wife Kiki has an abundance of the capacity to connect with other people. As the story progresses the allegedly non-intellectual Kiki, who is wounded by her husband's recent infidelity, gradually grows more critical of his attitudes. She accuses him of exerting a psychological terror on his family due to his ideas: "[...] everyone's scared to *speak* in case *you* think it's clichéd or dull – you are like the thought police" (393, emphasis in the original). Further, applying Jean Baudrillard's earlier pronouncements on the Gulf war to the private sphere, she rebuts the thinker's views, claiming that when one is hurt it is real not simulated: "Suffering is *real*" (394, emphasis in the original).

Howard is emotionally alienated not only from Jerome and his Christian views but also from his two other children, even though his daughter Zora, a student at Wellington, shares his theoretical rigour to the point of caricature. For instance, in the poetry class she attends she refutes the beauty of landscape poetry, as she believes it leads to pastoral fallacy: "I mean, isn't it a *depoliticised reification*, all this beauty stuff about landscape?" (218, emphasis added) As the title of the novel and the acknowledgement imply, Zadie Smith elaborates on Forster's understanding of beauty, which he shared with his Bloomsbury colleagues (namely, G.E. Moore's belief in "the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic experience"), by

embracing the views of the influential essay "On Beauty and Being Just" by the philosopher Elaine Scarry. In creating Zora's response Smith was directly inspired by Scarry's examples of the silencing of discussions about beauty in classrooms in higher education institutions: "Suddenly, out of the blue, someone begins to speak about the way a poet is reifying the hillside or painting or flower she seems to be so carefully regarding" (Scarry 1998: 43). Satirizing Zora's claim, Smith shares Scarry's view that the political critique of beauty, namely, that "beauty has distracted us from suffering" (Scarry 1998: 40), is unsubstantiated.<sup>1</sup> Like her father, Zora is consistent in her theoretical views and at the same time incapable of proper human involvement and sympathy, as demonstrated in her self-centered attitude to the street poet Carl Thomas who comes from an underprivileged Afro-American background.

The Belsey family first come into contact with Carl at an open-air performance of Mozart's Requiem. Yet, unlike the clerk Leonard Bast (*Howards End*) on whom this incident is modelled and whom the Schlegels meet at a concert hall in London, Carl is a powerful, charismatic and gifted rapper who attends this free concert in order to connect classical music with his own hip-hop production.

In *Howards End* music does not only have a thematic function but also a formal one, as Benjamin Britten famously demonstrated. According to him, musical techniques were inherent to the very structure of Forster's novels. In his essay "Some Notes on Forster and Music" Benjamin Britten claims that "the construction of Forster's novels often resembles the classical opera (Mozart-Weber-Verdi) where recitatives (the deliberately un-lyrical passages through which action is advanced) separate arias or ensembles (big, self-contained set pieces of high comedy or great emotional tension" (qtd. in Herz 1997: 140).

Given the much larger contemporary music scene, Zadie Smith expands Forster's understanding of music to include modern popular genres. Although a great number of singers and styles are mentioned throughout the novel, it is especially hip-hop that is highlighted. Levi, the younger son of the Belseys, is fond of it and on Saturdays works in a music mega store where he is in charge of the hip-hop section. When his track is played at the Belsey party some of the older academics dislike it and some of them even leave early in protest.

As hip-hop music corresponds to a particular lifestyle and values, a formal connection of the two (classical music and hip-hop) is also the novelist's attempt at a thematic connection: bringing together people of different classes and social backgrounds. Yet, such an attempt works for a short time only when the poet and tutor, Claire Malcolm, invites Carl to her poetry class. Carl does not feel very comfortable in a class where his poetry is rigorously formally analysed (Wordsworth's "we murder to dissect" is invoked). When Malcolm is officially challenged over the admissions process for her poetry class by the reactionary Monty Kipps, who is now a visiting professor at Wellington, Carl is removed from her class and is given a part-time job in the music library at the university. Even though he is happy to be the archivist of hip-hop music, the fifteen-year-old Levi Belsey, who has aspired to the hip-hop lifestyle in his clothing and in

his speech during the previous three years, sees him in a different light now: “And it was so strange to stand next to this ex-Carl, this played-out fool, this shell of a brother in whom all that was beautiful and thrilling and true had utterly evaporated” (389). Levi is especially referring to Carl’s attitude to a group of Haitian immigrants protesting outside, with whom Levi identifies. For the formerly highly politically conscious Carl this is just noise which prevents him from concentrating on his work.

Levi’s identification with hip-hop subculture is connected with his self-consciousness as a black man living in a privileged, mostly white, middle-class environment. Both emotionally and intellectually he is drawn to black identity and therefore identifies with Haitian immigrants, their moving political music, their life in the street and their political struggle. He is ashamed of his posh background and therefore mystifies his new friends about the street he lives in. He gives up his part-time job at the music mega store to be able to join them selling illegally produced DVDs in the street.

Whereas in *Howards End* only Leonard Bast (and his wife) represented the lower classes, Zadie Smith’s twenty-first century novel covers a much wider range: underprivileged Afro-Americans like Carl and Chantelle Williams, who also sits in Malcolm’s poetry class where a potential contact with elite university environment is explored, and also a whole range of Haitian immigrants who work as cleaners, taxi-drivers and street peddlers, even though their original position in Haiti was different, as in the case of Levi’s friend Choo, a former French literature teacher. With this second group of characters the social gap is unbridgeable and an attempt to connect is made by Levi alone. In *Howards End* the lowest classes “are unthinkable” (Forster 1989 [1910]: 58) for literary representation.

Laila Amine has claimed that Zadie Smith’s first novel, *White Teeth*, “gives the impression that it has frozen in time and consists mainly of white British, new Commonwealth immigrants from Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean, and their offspring – and more significantly, that its inhabitants seek to participate in a more inclusive nationalist agenda” (Amine 2007: 74-75). According to this critic, new migrants are completely missing in Smith’s first novel. Although the setting of *On Beauty* is mainly Boston rather than London, to which Laila Amine refers, Zadie Smith includes issues of new immigrants to the U.S., mainly from Haiti as shown above, who find themselves in a “liminal space” (Amine’s term) as they are confined within limited social spaces in terms of work and their place of residence.

Zora Belsey’s relationship to Carl goes through a dramatic development but rather a different one from Helen Schlegel’s relationship to Howard Bast. At first she repeatedly suspects Carl of stealing: first at the concert when she herself mistakenly takes his Discman, later on in a swimming pool when he borrows her unused goggles. In these incidents her unconscious prejudice, her bad faith towards the less privileged is shown as his questions of genuine interest about her family make her believe that his final objective is “her mother’s jewellery and the safe in the basement” (139). Her father reacts similarly when he declines Carl access

to the Belsey party although Carl has been invited by both Kiki and Levi. After witnessing the popularity of Carl's brilliant performance with her colleagues and Claire Malcolm at a local venue Zora changes her opinion about him and when later asked by Malcolm to lobby at a faculty meeting for his staying in the poetry class she does this with her characteristic rigour and zealously. Becoming sexually attracted to him in the process she is, however, like her father unable to achieve proper human involvement and she reacts inadequately and with disastrous consequences when she sees him making love to Victoria Kipps. This is the last we hear of Carl both on the campus and in the novel.

Unlike Carl and Kiki and Jerome, Howard Belsey does not appreciate the beauty of Mozart at the open-air concert, as this would contradict his theoretical view that Mozart's music is too authoritarian. He feels this is music that tries "to fake [him] into some metaphysical idea by the back door" (72). He is writing a book called "Against Rembrandt" and during his classes on the same subject his refutation of the beauty of art and an emotional response to art are consistently ridiculed and satirized by the narrator. According to Howard, Rembrandt was "a merely competent artisan who painted whatever his wealthy patrons requested. [He] asked his students to imagine *prettiness* as the mask that *power* wears" (155, emphasis added). This is again a political critique of beauty as Howard rejects "prettiness", claiming it is too powerful. We can find echoes of Scarry's thoughts here again: "Berated for its power, beauty is simultaneously belittled for its powerlessness" (Scarry 1998: 58).

At one point his views are confronted with the reasoning of a talented young student, Kathy Armstrong, who feels alienated and intimidated by the arcane language he uses when speaking about Rembrandt, whom she loves, as she feels that the originality and uniqueness of the artist is completely lost in Howard's presentation. The major reason why there is a "taboo on beauty" (Scarry's term) in his classes is his repudiation of the particular without which, as Scarry claims – going back as far as Homer – "the chances of seeing beauty go down" (Scarry 1998: 13). Howard rather sets himself the objective to interrogate "the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human" (252). Further on he resorts to generalizations about the *Staalmeesters* in Rembrandt's *The Sampling Officials of the Draper's Guild*: "The painting is an exercise in the depiction of economic power" (384). As shown earlier in the novel, Howard does not relish the beauty of a work of art but he perversely relishes the fear he evokes in his students with his highly theoretical language: "When he first began teaching he had tried, stupidly, to coax them out of this fear – now he positively relishes it (155). He certainly refuses to connect with his students through the power of art. We never learn whether Victoria Kipps is being ironic or serious when later – as she tries to seduce him – she praises him for the theoretical radicalism of his classes, which have got "nothing to do with *love* or *truth*" (312, emphasis in the original).

The climax of the ideological battle between Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps ("your silly ideological battles" as Claire Malcolm calls them, 120) is triggered

by Howard's tabling of a motion against Monty's proposed lecture series at Wellington. Unlike Howard, Monty is a celebrity and his book on Rembrandt, which Howard calls essentialist, is well researched. Yet, given Monty's notorious reputation for extreme right-wing iconoclasm, as well as the tenor of his most recent articles published in the Wellington papers, Howard is right in assuming that Monty's political lectures ("Taking the liberal out of the liberal arts") will antagonize and alienate a variety of groups on the campus. However, the phrasing of his request that Monty should present "the intention" of his lectures in a written form to the faculty is rather unfortunate. Monty then elegantly refutes such a proposal, referring to Howard's textual practice and arguing that he finds it hilarious ("bizarre," 327) that such a textual anarchist as Howard who both in his classes and in his writings speaks about "the indeterminacy of all sign systems" (328) should require to know the intention of a piece of writing. As a consequence, in the vote that is taken on whether Monty's lectures should take place, almost everybody is in favour of Monty. Stereotypes are certainly challenged in making the originally Trinidadian Monty such a right-wing character and in his sexual life a hypocrite, as we learn at the end of the novel.

In spite of the ideological war that has been waged between Howard and Monty for fifteen years, when the Kippses come to Wellington a peculiar friendship develops between their wives: the intuitive Carlene Kipps, partly modelled on Mrs Wilcox, who like her husband also comes from the Caribbean, and Kiki Belsey. Mrs. Wilcox bequeathed Howards End to Margaret Schlegel, whom she considered to be her spiritual heir. Carlene Kipps bequeaths a valuable, primitive Haitian painting to Kiki: Hector Hyppolite's *Maitresse Erzulie, the Voodoo Goddess or Black Virgin*, as she shares the appreciation and enjoyment of its beauty with her. As Scarry argues, beauty "incites deliberation" (Scarry 1998: 20) and the two women even plan to go together to a house in Amherst to enjoy some originals by Edward Hopper whom Kiki admires. "There is such a shelter in each other", which Carlene repeatedly quotes to Kiki to comment on their relationship, can be taken as a paraphrase of Forster's original motto: only connect. Yet, as Victoria contends after her mother's death, Carlene was a very private person who made friends only with people who were special in some way (314). However, like Mrs Wilcox, Carlene's power to connect people is felt even after her death. Even Jerome, who had experienced her community work during his earlier stay in Britain, is surprised to see that so many people of different classes and ethnicities have come to her funeral in London: "Can you imagine a funeral – any event – this mixed, back home?" (282).

Critics have argued that the ending of *Howards End* is ahistorical because it renders almost a textbook example of nostalgic pastoralism, as known in literature since Virgil. The country house, Howards End, becomes a refuge from "the civilization of luggage" and from the impending expansion of London, which is portrayed in Blakean terms as the city of Satan. Yet, the ambiguity of the word "end" in the title implies that Forster was aware of his ahistoricism (see e.g. Grmelová 2004: 47). Zadie Smith's replacement of a painting for a house shows

her awareness of Forster's ahistoricism and at the same time epitomizes her inspiration by other cultures.

In her study of *On Beauty*, Alice Fisher reveals Smith's inspiration by Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and especially her anthropological study of Voodoo: *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. Like Erzulie in the painting, Kiki wears a red bandana and, like the Voodoo Goddess, she feels sympathy towards lesbians and at one time even considered living with women. Quoting also other anthropological sources, Fisher shows that "[t]he revisionary potential of Voodoo spirituality has the power to "displace destructive 'binary' paradigms" including ideological ones (Fisher 2007: 291) which in terms of the novel clearly refers to the culture war between Howard and Monty.

Zadie Smith's engagement with different forms of beauty expands to references to paintings and statues from the first pages of the novel and these are often part of the descriptions of characters. Kiki Belsey, for whom the narrator feels empathy, is described at her breakfast table as a part of a still life composition with "[a] dark red Portuguese earthenware bowl [...] piled high with apples" (8) as the morning light extends through the door to another room, as in a Dutch painting. By contrast, Howard, who abhors representational art, at one point compares Zora and her mother to "two of Picasso's chubby water-carriers" (12). Later, Claire Malcolm finds Kiki so fabulous looking she suggests she should be in a fountain in Rome (121) while the stunningly beautiful Victoria Kipps looks like "one of those statuaries in the bottom of the Fitzwilliam, in Cambridge" (123).

The novel mainly celebrates the physical beauty of the black characters; Kiki and Carl who are Afro-Americans and Victoria Kipps who is of Caribbean parentage. She is the only character in the novel whose beauty even Howard admires. Alice Fisher argues that Smith's intention in her novel is "to reclaim beauty for all black women through allusion to Morrison's novel [*The Bluest Eye*]" (Fisher 2007: 289).

But it is not only the beauty of black women that is highlighted in the novel. When the prejudiced Zora first walks with Carl from the swimming pool she is ashamed to be in his company. After a few steps, however, she notices passers-by do not want "to release the imprint of Carl from their retinas" (137) as "his face was doing its silent voodoo on her, just as it seemed to work on everybody passing by him in this archway" (137).

Although the novel is not meant to be a treatise on beauty, as the title may imply, the different forms of beauty which Smith parades in the novel - music, paintings, statues, poems, human beings, friendship - also include the beauty of houses and trees as well as a celebration of London spaces. Hampstead Heath is hailed as the glory of London (275), Victorian cemeteries are paid tribute to and, in a departure from Forster's London, the city has a fluidity and a great potential for change. Even Howard is overwhelmed by the recent changes in some of the neighbourhoods (28).

Characters like Howard and Zora (because of their theoretical rigour) and Monty (because of his elitism) are unable and unwilling to appreciate beauty



because they are unable to focus on the particular and, therefore, like Forster's blind characters, are unable to connect with other people. The ability to respond to something beyond oneself is associated with Kiki, Carlene and Levi (who cries over the beauty of Haitian music). Howard is granted a glimpse of this feeling only at the very end of the novel when his habitual hubris is shaken by the trauma of his domestic crisis and professional humiliation. As Smith shares Scarry's observation that attention to beauty "incites deliberation" and "unselfing"<sup>2</sup> (Scarry 1998: 78) and, as a consequence, attention to other human beings, in showing the ethical significance of beauty in the novel she pays fitting homage to her master Forster.

## Notes

- 1 "The political critique of beauty is composed of two distinct arguments. The first urges that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements. It makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just. The second argument holds that when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object" (Scarry 1998: 39).
- 2 Scarry refers to the French mystic Simone Weil and especially to Iris Murdoch for the usage of the term "unselfing" (Scarry 1998: 77–78). See also Peter Conradi's discussion of the concept in Murdoch's novels (Conradi 1987 [1986]: 13).

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