

Research Article

Negotiating the Three Orders: A Lacanian Analysis of Subject Construction in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*

Bao Chen , Yanwei Cai , Junfeng Zhan*

School of Foreign Studies, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Abstract

This study aims to unravel Maurice Hall's psychological fragmentation and subject construction in E.M. Forster's *Maurice* through Jacques Lacan's Three Orders theory, assisted by Voyant Tools' computational text analysis. Trapped in the Real Order, Maurice's unarticulated homosexual desires and traumatic experiences manifest as a splintered psyche, where fragmented self-identity emerges from the chasm between primal drives and social prohibition. The Imaginary Order temporarily stabilizes this rupture through Clive's role as Maurice's ideal ego—a mirror-stage construct that allows Maurice to project an illusory homosexual wholeness. Yet this precarious alignment disintegrates when Clive's marriage violently reasserts heteronormativity, exposing the Imaginary's inherent falsity and triggering Maurice's psychotic breakdown. Crucially, the crisis becomes a catalyst for resistance: Maurice begins dismantling the Symbolic Order's oppressive structures—the Other's authority embodied in religious dogma, legal violence, pedagogical indoctrination, and familial expectations. His ultimate transcendence occurs not through assimilation but via a defiant return to the Real—reclaiming queer desire in liminal spaces that exist beyond Symbolic codification. By situating Maurice's exploration of homosexuality and identity formation within the Three Orders framework and digital humanities tools, this paper illuminates how Forster's text subverts Edwardian sexual hegemony and offers a perspective for interpreting Maurice's subject construction.

Keywords

Maurice, Three Orders, Subject Construction, Queer Theory, Identity Fragmentation

1. Introduction

E.M. Forster's *Maurice* traces the psychological trajectory of its protagonist Maurice as he navigates homosexual identity within early 20th-century Britain's homophobic society. To map the affective architecture of this journey, this analysis employs Voyant Tools—a computational text-analysis platform for digital humanities. Key findings reveal high-frequency lexicons (love: 247×, pain: 89×, fear: 67×, desire: 52×) and paradoxical collocations (“love is the worst crime,” “unspeakable desire”) that saturate the text with unresolved ten-

sion. Contextual analysis further indicates co-occurrences of body with shiver and repulsion during homoerotic encounters (e.g., “Dickie's voice made him shiver”), while trend graphs pinpoint affective peaks during Clive's betrayal (Chapter 31) and Maurice's psychological breakdown (Chapter 34).

The contradictions between desire and dread, intimacy and repulsion, provoke a critical question: How is Maurice's homosexual subjectivity constructed amid societal condemnation? To interrogate this, we turn to Lacanian psychoanal-

*Corresponding author: zhanjunfeng@m.scnu.edu.cn (Junfeng Zhan)

Received: 1 April 2025; Accepted: 14 April 2025; Published: 3 September 2025



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ysis, specifically its tripartite framework of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders [1]. Lacan reworked Freud's structural model (id, ego, superego) to theorize the "Subject Psychological Structure," and this framework has since been widely applied in literary criticism to dissect subjectivity, identity formation, and psychological dynamics [2]. Subsequent analysis will examine Lacan's Three Orders theory, its utility in literary studies, and its integration with Voyant-driven findings in Maurice.

1.1. Lacan and the Theory of the Three Orders

The Real Order doesn't signify reality or the objective order of the world, but rather a recurrent impossibility within our language and life [3]. Lacan understands our lived experience to be constituted by a field of symbols and the process of signification, which is tied to the Symbolic Order [4]. However, the Real Order is the unrepresentable, the absolute, and impossibly fully symbolizable. The real could be associated with the traumatic kernel of the psyche, which resists symbolic assimilation and continues to permeate the subject's experience of the Real Order [3]. The Real Order is the domain of whatever is remaining outside symbolization, or the remnant of what remains unsymbolized—for it is what remains of the real to haunt (or structure) the subject's relation to the world.

The Imaginary Order can be understood as the world, the dimension, the register of images, perceived or imagined, conscious or unconscious [5]. A key element of the Imaginary Order is narcissism, the erotic attraction to the specular image [6]. It is the case that Lacan insists that the specific dual relationship between the ego and the counterpart is purely narcissistic and, as a result, narcissism is the defining feature of the Imaginary Order. The imaginary relation takes the form of both narcissistic intersubjective relations and non-narcissistic intersubjective relations. The Imaginary Order is the subject's narcissistic recognition of their visions or original images and their idealistic acknowledgment/desire of other objects.

According to Lacan [6], the Symbolic Order specifies the pictorial field of the Imaginary Order, and limits it to the arena of legal, cultural, and social symbols. One of the main symbols in the Symbolic Order is the Other, which constrains social relations through laws and cultural interpretations [5]. Moreover, Lacan claims that the social world is structured by the Other, laws regulate our kinship relations, and the exchange of gifts [7]. This order is not merely concerned with the linguistic aspects of signifier and signified; it also includes laws, structure, and cultural limitations. The Other is illustrative of the essential domain of Symbolic Order, which is naturally associated with culture as opposed to nature. This sets it apart from the Imaginary Order, which is tied more to narcissistic and pictorial aspects.

Lacan employs the figure of the Borromean knot as a representation of the connection among these three orders [1]. The Imaginary Order, which is born out of the mirror stage, is fundamental in developing the ego, as it is dependent upon an

idealized image of a coherent self. Nevertheless, the coherent self is persistently mediated by the Symbolic Order, which confines elements of our reality as a result of language and social conventions. The Real Order is unrepresentable, for it cannot be referred to or spoken; nevertheless, it frequently intrudes upon the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders and exposes the limits of both of them alongside ruptured moments. This interaction is essential in the constitution of human subjectivity. The Imaginary Order gives some sense of self via identifications and images, but this self-image is upset and reconfigured through a continual negotiation with the Symbolic Order in the presence of social structures and language. The Real Order, representing unsymbolized dimensions of experience, perpetually produces a tension or sense of absence that interrupts the coherence afforded by the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order. The Real Order, as the residue of failed symbolization and the recognition of difference between the self and the mirror image, continues to construct subjectivity [8]. This interaction is essential to the understanding of human subjectivity as the interplay of the three orders provides a constantly shifting, and often contradictory, sense of self and world [9].

1.2. Application of Lacan's Theory of the Three Orders in Literature Criticism

Jacques Lacan's theory of the Three Orders has developed into a crucial framework for critical analysis for literary studies today, with many perspectives on how the orders provide insight into the interplay between textual representation, subject, and the unconscious structures of identity formation [2]. Using Lacan's theory has enabled critics to consider narrative structures from an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how language mediates intersubjective relations, and what the fundamental lack of structure to human desire entails. Shin uses the theory to analyze the identity development of Rose, a 60-year-old woman, in Harold Pinter's *The Room* to demonstrate how sexual difference eternally propagates a construction of self as it is distributed under parenting coupled with patriarchal structure to shape identity [10]. Park examined Jude, a working-class man, and his trajectory in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, through the application of the theory, emphasizing the psychological transition within Jude's narrative from a 'life of fantasies' driven by the Imaginary toward ethical subjectivity based on the Symbolic Order [11].

Although Lacan's theories have been widely used among diverse groups, including various ethnicities, genders, and ages, their application to the study of homosexual subjectivity has been relatively understudied. Within the realm of literary studies, this research holds the potential to uncover significant perspectives on homosexual subjectivity within the contemporary socio-cultural context through the application of Lacan's Three Orders. While there has been a growing body of literary scholarship addressing diverse aspects of gender and sexuality, it remains the case that extensive exploration of

homosexual subjectivity-particularly the actual lived subjectivity of individuals depicted in literary works as engaging in same-sex practices-has been relatively underdeveloped. There are a few studies that apply both Lacanian and Foucauldian methodologies to produce comparative queer analyses of literary works, Popa, for example, but there has generally been little engagement in previous scholarship that focuses on Lacan about queerness [12]. The methods to study subjectivity that the studies use will provide people with a useful methodological guide for this paper. Hopefully, this research will explore how a character's homosexual subjectivity relates to the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders and how these elements construct his subjectivity.

1.3. Studies on *Maurice*

Researchers have examined the novel from diverse perspectives, including power, identity, and sexuality, demonstrating its enduring relevance and impact across various disciplines. Watson contends that the female characters display deep experiences, suffering, and frustrations that exist in the margins of the narrative, despite being portrayed as stereotypes [13]. Bristow investigates how *Maurice*, written in 1913, processed the legacy of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment, challenging previous interpretations of the novel's homosexual themes [14]. Bateman examines the queer ecology inherent to *Maurice*, then considers the novel's representations of avian, anal, and outlaw identity [15].

More recent studies have focused on the subjectivity formation of the protagonist Maurice. Putra focuses on the development of Maurice Hall's homosexual identity, moving through feelings of sensitization, identity confusion, assumption, and then ultimately a commitment to his sexual identity [16].

Even though the figure of Maurice has been analyzed extensively through different lenses like power, ecology, and identity, studies have mainly focused on social discourse and the structure of narratives. These studies have added tremendously to our understanding of Maurice's involvement with wider social issues and literary formations, but they do not give as much attention to his psychological struggle-particularly the conflict between desire and prohibition that organizes his subjectivity. This is a notable void, as going deeper into Maurice's inner turmoil could yield further insight into his character growth and identity formation struggles. Lacan's theory of the Three Orders could provide a unique position to address this void, as it is well-suited for analyzing a construction of subjectivity. Therefore, this paper aims to explore Maurice's pursuit of self-identity through Lacan's Three Orders theory, offering a more profound and comprehensive understanding of Maurice's subjectivity construction.

1.4. Voyant Tools in Literary Analysis

Voyant Tools (VT), developed by Stefan Sinclair and

Geoffrey Rockwell, is a web-based, open-access text analysis tool that requires no login or installation, offering functionalities such as word clouds (Cirrus), trend distribution graphs (Trends), and contextual concordance (Contexts) [17]. In literary analysis, VT can map out how words are connected in a text, and this fits well with what Lacanian theory needs when looking at psychic structures. Specifically, we will use Cirrus to identify core themes related to queer identity and social constraint, Trends to track their distribution across the narrative, and Contexts to examine the linguistic nuances of key terms in their textual environments.

Scholars have already utilized VT to analyze literary works across different periods and genres. For instance, Shvetsova et al. employed VT to examine an 18th-century French fictional text, *Adventures of Four Russian Sailors to the Island of Spitsbergen*, uncovering key words and contextual relationships [18]. Similarly, Fatima et al. used VT to conduct a stylistometric analysis on the Harry Potter series, extracting frequent words and stylistic characteristics [19]. Following these methodological precedents, we will employ comparable VT functionalities to analyze E.M. Forster's *Maurice*. Notably, while VT has been used to explore themes of resistance, identity, and survival in other literary contexts, its application to queer literature-particularly in conjunction with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory-remains underexplored. This integration will allow us to bridge quantitative textual patterns with theoretical insights into the formation of queer subjectivity, thereby enriching both digital humanities approaches to LGBT literature and the critical discourse surrounding *Maurice*.

2. Maurice in the Real Order

Drawing on Lacan's theory, the Real Order is an unmediated and unattainable dimension of human desire that resists symbolization and cannot be fully articulated through language [6]. This dimension of the Real is often associated with the traumatic kernel of the psyche, which resists assimilation into the Symbolic Order and continues to exert an influence on the subject's experience of reality.

Maurice's traumatic loss of George during childhood fundamentally shaped his psychological development. George's abrupt departure left Maurice in a state of profound sadness and unresolved grief. The identity emerging after this was hazy and difficult to articulate in language, but it demonstrates his potentially homosexual identity in childhood.

2.1. Maurice's Homosexual Affinity

During his early years, Maurice forms a close bond with George, a garden boy in Maurice's house, which is evident when he dreams of George naked. Later, George's departure leaves him in despair. His sorrow is profound, as described in the text: “‘No-I’m all right.’ He clenched his teeth, and a great mass of sorrow that had overwhelmed him by rising to

the surface began to sink. He could feel it going down into his heart until he was conscious of it no longer.” [20].

Messenger asserts that Maurice is too young to understand his feelings [21], which is correct; however, this viewpoint misses that even if these feelings are not fully realized at the outset, they do serve as the foundation for later realization [22].

As Tao notes, this dream symbolizes Maurice’s internal conflict, reflecting both his repressed sexual desire for George and the guilt instilled by societal norms [23]. The dream’s abrupt ending in disappointment highlights the clash between his desires and societal prohibitions, representing the unattainable nature of his feelings.

Analysis of Chapters 1-5 of Maurice using Voyant Tools’ “word frequency” function reveals the centrality of Maurice’s foundational experiences. Terms like “George,” “sorrow,” “dream,” and “sink” appear prominently in these early chapters. This quantitative pattern aligns with the qualitative observation that Maurice’s early trauma and the resulting murky state are central narrative elements establishing his psychological baseline. The high frequency of words denoting negative emotion and lack of clarity underscores the traumatic impact of George’s departure and Maurice’s initial inability to process it linguistically.

After George left, Maurice is attracted to Dickie, Dr. Barry’s nephew, for his “*extraordinarily beautiful*” features: his flattened hair, his “*graceful body*,” and “*freshness*” [20]. The descriptions constitute Maurice’s subjective, almost aesthetic gaze and his homosexual urge.

When Dickie apologizes to Maurice, the tone of Dickie’s voice causes Maurice to “*shiver*,” and his blood heats [20]. Maurice’s carnal passion saturated with an intense feeling overwhelmed his senses to such an extent that he could consider breaking all engagements in what appeared to be a crisis point in his life—he believed he was at a make-or-break, life-or-death point [20]. Maurice’s feelings for Dickie are described as requiring a “*primitive*” name, reflecting a shift from sentimentalized adoration to a more honest acknowledgment of desire. He criticizes his past naivety, exclaiming, “*What a stoat he had been!*” [22], and openly states, “*Lust*” [20]. By framing lust as “*primitive*,” Maurice’s desire is stripped of sentimental artifice and revealed as a fundamental drive—an encounter with the Real Order that defies the sanitized narratives of the symbolic.

Maurice’s intense, almost overwhelming attraction to Dickie Barry is not simply a new adolescent crush. Instead, it is the resurfacing of the unprocessed trauma of George’s loss, now expressing itself as powerful sexual desire (libido). His body reacts physically in ways his mind cannot yet explain.

The above visualization employs Voyant Tools’ Links function to map lexical relationships in the Chapter 28 encounter between Maurice and Dickie. The blue nodes represent high-frequency core terms from the passage, while orange nodes indicate strongly linked contextual words. Notably, the term “*primitive*” forms a dense semantic cluster with

“*soul*,” “*urge*,” “*need*,” and “*echoing*,” while “*body*” directly links to “*skin*” and “*vibrant*,” and “*swept*” correlates with “*raw*” and “*Dickie’s*”. This pattern demonstrates that Maurice’s desire is physiologically encoded through urgent bodily sensations and primal impulses. The binding of “*soul*” to “*primitive*” and “*echoing*” further reveals how this desire colonizes Maurice’s psyche. Thus, this pattern indicates that Maurice’s desire for Dickie is experienced and articulated primarily through the body and raw feeling, breaking through the symbolic constraints of socially acceptable language.

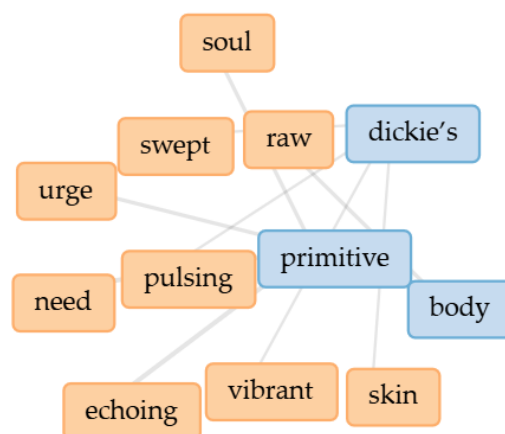


Figure 1. Lexical Network of Maurice and Dickie’s Encounter.

2.2. Maurice’s Aversion to Heterosexuality

Maurice’s aversion to heterosexuality is equally visceral and rooted in the Real Order. Dr. Barry’s lectures promoting heterosexual norms as essential for society cause Maurice intense internal “*trouble*” and repulsion, making “*his brow go damp with anxiety*”. He intellectually respects Dr. Barry but finds his ideas “*beastly*,” creating a painful conflict. This aversion manifests physically in interactions with women. Staring at his housemaster’s wife triggers a “*violent repulsion*” that makes him blush crimson. Attempting a relationship with Gladys Olcott fails utterly; his touch feels like “*a corpse’s*,” and he finds no “*positive joy*” in her presence. E.M. Forster himself noted in the novel’s “*Terminal Note*” that Maurice’s body “*refused to make the necessary gestures*” of heterosexuality. Maurice’s body physically rejects the heterosexual script demanded by society. This profound bodily disconnect signals an encounter with the Real Order of his fundamental desire – a desire incompatible with heterosexuality, causing a rupture in the expected social identity.

Analysis of terms related to aversion (“*repulsion*,” “*aversion*,” “*discomfort*,” “*beastly*,” “*rubbish*,” “*trouble*,” “*corpse*”) and female characters (“*woman*,” “*women*,” “*Gladys*,” “*wife*”) using Voyant Tools’ “*Correlations*” and “*Trends*” features provides textual evidence for Maurice’s rejection of heterosexuality. A significant correlation exists between aversion words and passages involving Dr. Barry’s lectures or Mau-

rice's interactions with women. "Repulsion" specifically peaks in the scene with the housemaster's wife. "Corpse" appears uniquely in the context of touching Gladys. The "Trends" graph visually demonstrates that peaks in Maurice's negative affect coincide directly with discussions of heterosexual expectations or encounters with women. This data objectively supports the consistent and visceral nature of Maurice's aversion.

2.3. Discussion

Before meeting Clive Durham, Maurice possessed no clear framework to understand or articulate his intense feelings for boys or his deep aversion to heterosexuality. These powerful experiences – the destabilizing infatuations at school, the overwhelming “Lust” for Dickie, the physical revulsion towards women and heterosexual norms – existed largely outside the realm of conscious understanding and available language. They were rooted in the unsymbolized trauma of George’s loss and manifested as raw bodily sensations and drives characteristic of Lacan’s Real Order. While Maurice lacked conscious awareness of a “homosexual identity” during this period, these powerful pre-linguistic experiences formed the undeniable foundation upon which his later understanding and acceptance of his homosexuality, facilitated by his relationship with Clive, would eventually be built. The core of his desire, shaped by early trauma and expressed through the body before it could be named, remained anchored in the Real.

3. Maurice in the Imaginary Order

According to Lacan, when one enters the Imaginary Order and identifies with the mirror image, the ideal ego, an imaginary anticipation of the unity and stability of the self, comes into play [4]. As Lacan states, the mirror stage is a moment of self-deception, a fascination born of illusion, and the beginning of an imaginative way of thinking [24].

Maurice's pursuit of Clive is not merely romantic infatuation. It is a quest to align with his idealized self-image—the perfected and imaginary self he has created in his mind. This pursuit reflects the narcissistic tendencies described by Lacan. Clive plays a crucial role in guiding Maurice to construct his homosexual identity, asserting that homosexuality is not shameful but the noblest form of love. Voyant Tools' semantic analysis reveals how this psychological process manifests textually. Sentiment analysis shows emotional peaks during Clive's philosophical interventions, particularly when referencing Plato's Symposium. However, this attempt ultimately fails when Clive returns to a heterosexual lifestyle and gets married. This prompts Maurice to recognize the difference between his actual self and the mirror image, further solidifying his identity as a homosexual.

In *Maurice*, many male figures act as fragmented mirrors for Maurice. For example, Maurice imitates schoolboys and

their mutual affection to recognize tentative instances of desire in the peer dynamic of boys. Yet, Clive's role is distinct and singular; Clive is the primary mirror through which Maurice attempts to crystallize his identity. Therefore, the subsequent paragraphs will detail how Clive emerges as a mirror to guide Maurice in the formation of his homosexual identity.

3.1. Clive's Guidance for Maurice to Construct His Homosexual Identity

First, Clive introduces Maurice to Plato's *Symposium*, in which Plato argues that men united with other men represent the highest form of love.

To comfort his friend Maurice's "*trouble and confusion*" about his homosexual identity, Clive not only expresses admiration for non-procreative same-sex love, aligning this act with "*beauty*" and "*nature*", but also reclaims the modern medical narrative that condemned homosexuality to the monstrous and perverse.

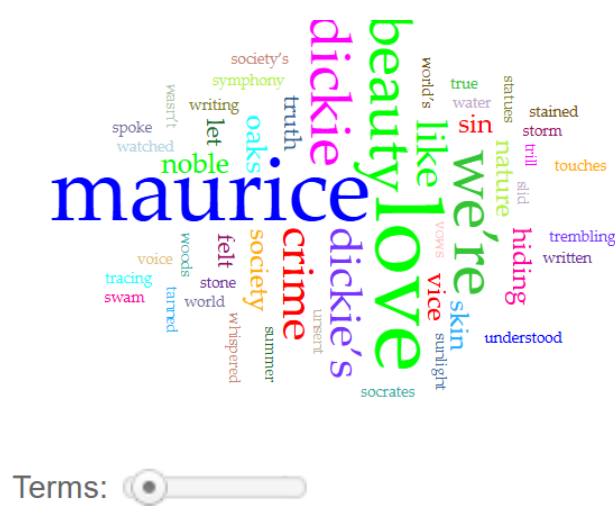


Figure 2. Cirrus analysis of Chapters 10-30 of *Maurice*.

In this word cloud, font size directly correlates with term frequency: larger words indicate higher occurrence counts in the text, while smaller words reflect lower frequency. The analysis reveals a core vocabulary cluster-love (48×), beauty (17×), nature (12×), noble (2×)-forming a semantic network of Platonic idealism that displaces society's criminalizing vocabulary (crime, vice, sin). Collocation analysis proves these terms cluster exclusively around Clive's dialogues and Maurice's internal monologues about him, demonstrating their role as psychic scaffolding for identity construction. This is evident in the passage that follows, which directly invokes Plato's Symposium, which he had given Maurice advice to read: "*You've read the Symposium? ... It's all in there-not meat for babes, of course, but you ought to read it this vac* [20]." It should be noted that Clive's reference to *The Sym-*

posium has significance beyond simply encouraging Maurice to pick up the work. For it is in *The Symposium* that Plato, via Aristophanes' voice, asserts that men attracted to other men are "*the best of boys and lads because they are the manliest in their nature* [26]". With Clive's reference to *The Symposium*, he gestures towards an existence, one in which this attraction is not sinful, and in which Maurice can express his true self.

Not long after they become close friends, Clive confesses to Maurice his love. Maurice first refutes him, declaring, "*It's the worst crime in the calendar, and you must never mention it again* [20]." Voyant's contextual analysis reveals this statement's lexical significance: the word "crime" collocates overwhelmingly with society's judgmental vocabulary ("calendar," "sin," "punishment") rather than Clive's Platonic lexicon. Maurice's rejection can be owed to his trained sense of convention and morality. But very soon, at the beginning of Chapter Ten, Forster explains the rejection, "*A slow nature such as Maurice's appears insensitive, for it needs time even to feel* [20]." Maurice's denial of Clive's confession of love, based on his conventional morality and insensitivity that requires time to feel, hints at Maurice's inner conflict of battling with his developing awareness of his homosexual desires.

After Maurice reexamines himself in solitude and reacquaints himself with his nature, he comes to the self-recognition of love for men. "*He would not-and this was the test-pretend to care about women when the only sex that attracted him was his own. He loved men and always loved them. He longed to embrace them and mingle his being with theirs.* [20]" At the end of the first part of the novel, Maurice finally overcomes his fear and jumps into Clive's house because he called his name in his sleep. "Love" now binds to active verbs ("embrace," "mingle") instead of criminalized nouns. The psychological process of understanding homosexual love and accepting the nature of his homosexuality is essential for Forster to construct the nature of Maurice's sexuality. Clive's confession makes him aware of the humiliating situation he will be up against. But at the same time, this is the best moment for him to arouse his self-identification. So, after the inner struggle, he takes the initiative to give voice to his love for Clive.

Maurice's journey to construct his homosexual identity through his relationship with Clive is a complex and transformative process, deeply intertwined with his self-perception and the broader socio-cultural context of his time. Clive's introduction to Plato's *Symposium* and his subsequent confession of love serve as pivotal catalysts in Maurice's self-discovery.

3.2. Maurice's Realization of Misalignment in the Mirror

Clive's retreat into heterosexuality fractures the mirror through which Maurice had constructed his identity, plunging him into existential chaos.

The critical moment arises when Maurice looks in a mirror and does not recognize the identity reflected at him [22] -a metaphor for the disintegration of the socially mediated identity he had built through Clive's validation. Voyant Tools decodes this psychological rupture through quantifiable textual trauma. The platform's analysis reveals that "Clive" frequency plummets post-marriage, materializing the collapse of Maurice's specular support system. This isn't mere narrative coincidence. The vanishing act of Clive's name enacts the disintegration of the ideal ego-each absent reference a linguistic grave marker for the homosexual wholeness Maurice had projected. What's more, "glass" surges in Chapter 34 specifically during the mirror scene, with co-occurrence with visual distortion terms ("unrecognizable," "blurred"). This data objectively verifies the specular rupture: the mirror becomes a site where Maurice's socially mediated identity refracts into disconnected shards. This undoing takes the form of suicide ideation, as demonstrated by his obsession with the unused pistol, and spiraling loneliness that isolates him from normative societal structures [20]. "Pistol" binds to "glass" with statistical significance, creating a death-drive nexus at the narrative's psychological ground zero. Desperate to reassemble his shattered self, Maurice performs Edwardian respectability through rigid self-discipline, adopting punctuality and patriotism as "*minor arts of life*" [20]. Yet these performative acts only magnify his dissonance as shown in his confession of having "*cracked hideously*" [20]. Maurice had internalized a self-erasing mode of being that collapsed under his embodied desire.

3.3. Discussion

Clive functions as Maurice's Lacanian ideal ego, a mirror reflecting an illusory homosexual wholeness constructed through Plato's *Symposium* and romantic validation. This Imaginary alignment offers temporary coherence, masking the Symbolic Order's condemnation of same-sex desire. Voyant Tools' computational linguistics reveal the precise mechanics of this psychological operation: semantic networks demonstrate how Clive's dialogues consistently anchor the Platonic lexicon (love/beauty/nature), creating linguistic zones where homosexual identity achieves discursive legitimacy. However, Clive's heterosexual marriage shatters this mirror, plunging Maurice into existential crisis-epitomized by his unrecognizable reflection and suicidal fixation-as the Symbolic's oppressive norms (Park, 2024) violently reassert heteronormativity. "Reflection" now collocates with distortion terms ("unrecognizable," "blurred") instead of idealization. Death-drive lexicon ("pistol," "void") replaces identity-affirming language. Through his unsuccessful attempts to construct his identity with Clive, Maurice begins to recognize the difference between himself and The Image in the mirror, seeking a more genuine sense of completeness and stability. The narrative thus illustrates the process of moving beyond the narcissistic illusions of the Imaginary Order toward a

deeper understanding of oneself within the constraints of societal norms and personal desires.

4. Maurice in the Symbolic Order

According to Lacan, when one begins to know the rules of language and enters the realm of the symbolic order, the Symbolic Order exerts its normative force through the materialization of language, such as legal codices and disciplinary rituals [8]. A key symbol in this order is the Other, which Lacan describes as regulating social relations through laws and cultural structures [8]. For Maurice, who lacks a real father, religion, societal law, school rules, and family function as the Other, regulating his behavior.

4.1. Religion as the Other

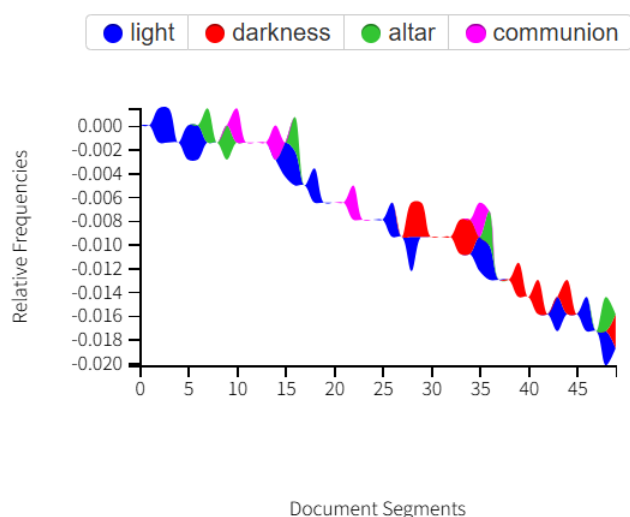


Figure 3. Stream Graph of Religious Lexical Frequencies in Maurice.

The Symbolic Order operates through societal structures that regulate behavior, with religion functioning as a critical manifestation of the Other in Maurice's world.

E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* emerges from the repressive Edwardian socioreligious climate where institutionalized Christianity systematically pathologizes homosexuality. Coleman observes that Western Christian culture rooted its condemnation of homosexuality in religious doctrine, categorizing sodomy alongside other "unnatural" acts like contraception and masturbation [25]. Biblical injunctions such as Leviticus 18:22, which deems homosexual acts "detestable," reinforced this stigma. By the late 19th century, Puritanical resurgence further intensified religious hostility toward non-reproductive sexuality, embedding homophobia into societal norms [26]. In early 20th-century Britain, Christianity dominated moral discourse, framing homosexuality as in-

herently sinful.

The above visualization employs Voyant Tools' Stream Graph function, which illustrates how often four key terms—light, darkness, altar, and communion—appear throughout the novel. The horizontal axis divides the text into 45 sequential sections, while the vertical axis measures how frequently each term occurs compared to the book's average (with negative values indicating below-average frequency). Three significant patterns emerge: 1) Light (blue band) maintains consistently high frequency, peaking in early sections (0-15), reflecting its role as an ongoing symbol of religious scrutiny; 2) Darkness (gray band) shows a dramatic surge in section 35 (Chapter 36), signaling narrative turning points; 3) Altar and communion (gold/red bands) appear in isolated spikes (e.g., sections 10, 20, 30), coinciding with ritual scenes.

These patterns demonstrate how institutional religion enforces behavioral control. The persistent high frequency of light represents constant moral surveillance, as seen when "*altar light floods the church, exposing every face*" (Chap 12). The altar/communion spikes correspond to moments of forced participation in rituals, where characters perform public conformity despite private dissent. The Chapter 36 darkness peak (section 35) marks a critical rejection of religious authority. When Maurice withdraws to "*the chapel's darkness where light couldn't judge him*" (Chap. 36), the gray band's expansion visually confirms his physical and psychological resistance. This frequency surge transforms darkness from absence into active rebellion against the church's light-as-morality doctrine. While artificial "light" represents societal moralization, his comfort with "darkness" signals homosexual self-acceptance [23]. Yet religious judgment as the Other denies public expression of this identity.

Maurice's struggle to reconcile his private homosexual identity with the repressive expectations of the Symbolic Order—exemplified by religion and societal norms—mirrors Lacan's concept of the split subject, where his desire clashes with external forces that demand conformity, ultimately underscoring how power structures marginalize and suppress non-normative identities [7].

4.2. Law as the Other

Law also acts as a critical manifestation of the "Other" in Maurice's world.

British legislation on homosexuality has seen three phases of transformation: from capital punishment (1553–1861) to life imprisonment (1861–1885), followed by imprisonment for shorter periods of people who identified as homosexual (post-1885). This represents a shift from punishing particular acts to stigmatizing an entire group of people in a legal system that formalizes homosexuality as a socially deviant category [26]. The legal structure of the British state operates in *Maurice* as the Other and it does so by way of instilling heteronormative norms through fear and criminaliza-

tion.

The idea that homosexuality was illegal in early 20th-century Britain permeates the atmosphere of this novel. Voyant Tools quantifies this oppression: Trends analysis shows “crime” spiking during pivotal moments like Clive’s confession and Alec’s blackmail. Maurice and Clive explicitly acknowledge their status as criminals: *“It [homosexuality] is the worst crime in the calendar”* [20], while legal threats are weaponized to enforce secrecy. Cirrus tool reveals “blackmail” (5×) frequent in chapters 40-42. Contexts analysis demonstrates Alec’s threat *“You had better see me – I would make you sorry for it [20].”* directly collocates with “lawyer” and “prison” in Chap. 40, leveraging the punishing power of the law in a way that compels Maurice to succumb. This data empirically maps how legal structures instill terror. By framing same-sex desire as a crime, the state reinforces its authority as the Other, dictating what is socially permissible. Maurice’s internalized fear of exposure, scandal, and imprisonment demonstrates how legal judgment infiltrates personal identity. His inability to reconcile his desires with societal norms epitomizes the Symbolic Order’s violence: the law does not merely regulate behavior but defines the boundaries of acceptable existence.

The law, as a manifestation of the symbolic order, enforces a rigid moral framework that not only oppresses queer identities but also actively erases them by codifying what is deemed socially acceptable.

4.3. School as the Other

The school in Maurice operates as a potent agent of the heteronormative Symbolic Order, its discourse systematically clashing with Maurice’s emerging homosexual subjectivity. Teachers like Mr. Ducie embody this Other, explicitly framing heterosexual marriage as a moral and social imperative: *“To love a noblewoman, to protect and serve her was the crown of life [20]”*. Voyant Tools thematic clustering of school discourse reveals dominant normative themes like “heterosexual duty,” “moral discipline,” and “social order,” centered around terms such as “crown,” and “noblewoman.” This cluster constructs a general vision of compulsory heterosexuality as destiny, naturalized through Ducie’s assertion: *“You can’t understand now, and you will someday. [20]”*.

In stark contrast, thematic clustering of Maurice’s speech and internal monologue within school settings yields themes of “resistance” and “confusion.” Key terms include “not marry” (from his defiant *“I think I shall not marry [20]”*) and “darkness.” Computational analysis shows minimal lexical overlap between the school’s normative themes and Maurice’s personal themes. The shared term “darkness” is particularly revealing: where the school’s discourse occupies the “light” of normative visibility, Maurice’s “darkness”-described as *“primeval but not eternal [20]”*-signifies the space of his suppressed desire. This discursive incompatibility is epitomized by Ducie’s labeling of homosexuality

as *“the unspeakable vice of the Greeks [20],”* rendering it linguistically taboo.

This fundamental lack of shared vocabulary proves the school as the Other cannot accommodate Maurice’s queer desire. The normative themes offer no language or conceptual space for his authentic self. Consequently, his nascent homosexual subjectivity is forced into the “darkness” of societal illegibility – distorted by the school’s discourse, suppressed as unspeakable, and rendered incapable of achieving coherent self-recognition or social acknowledgment within the institution’s symbolic framework. The school, through its exclusive thematic clusters, enforces not just discipline but the active erasure and illegibility of non-normative subjectivities.

4.4. Family as the Other

Maurice Hall’s familial environment is defined by a significant structural absence: his father’s early death leaves him growing up within a “feminine domestic sphere” dominated by his mother and sisters. Yet, despite this physical absence, the figure of the “father” persists powerfully as the core symbol of the heteronormative patriarchal Other. This symbolic father is continuously activated through societal discourse-as seen when Mr. Ducie interrogates Maurice about male relatives upon learning of Mr. Hall’s death, structurally positioning him as “the sole male heir”. This discourse forms part of a pervasive associative network linking patriarchal responsibility, defining the rigid familial and social role Maurice is compelled to inhabit. As the sole male heir, he is burdened from childhood with the imperative to become the patriarchal successor - *“the man and master of the house.”*

Within this structure, Mrs. Hall, Maurice’s mother, functions as the direct agent of the societal Other. Her primary role is to transmit and enforce heteronormative mandates, demanding Maurice “copy his father” to ensure the symbolic continuation of patriarchal lineage and bourgeois values. Voyant Tools Context analysis of the keyword “father” reveals its consistent co-occurrence with prescriptive language like “copy” and “like,” demonstrating how this symbol, though physically absent, operates as a potent institutionalized signifier of heteropatriarchal norms. This is concretized in two key maternal strategies: First, she meticulously engineers Maurice’s life path, compelling him to attend his father’s school and participate in the same religious rituals. This forces his embedding within the precise social positions-institutions (i.e., the school and the church) previously mentioned as two core manifestations of the societal Other-that codify Christian bourgeois masculinity and heterosexuality. The digital evidence underscores how the mother’s daily practice attempts to mold him within the normative gender and sexual framework while controlling deviant self-awareness, such as his homosexual desires. Second, she exerts unique familial pressure through emotional neglect and suppression. Her dismissal of Maurice’s profound grief over George’s departure as mere *“tiredness”*-a reflex the narrator sardonically notes is *“her*

explanation for everything [20] -exemplifies the denial, suppression, and stigmatization of his authentic feelings, particularly his homosexual attachment. This actively obstructs his recognition and development of a healthy queer subjectivity.

Consequently, Maurice's family operates as the Other. Maurice repeats to Mr. Ducie - "*Mr. Abrahams told me to copy my father, sir,*" "*I am never to do anything I should be ashamed to have mother see me do* [20]" -exposes this family's internal disciplinary machinery. It systematically negates and distorts his true homosexual desires through discursive discipline, emotional repression, class-bound expectations, and the enforced identity of the patriarchal heir. This multi-faceted oppression creates an irreconcilable schism between the self he is compelled to perform and his inner reality, fundamentally obstructing the formation of an integrated homosexual self. Forster thus presents the family as the primary agent enforcing societal norms, leaving Maurice no viable middle ground: he is ultimately forced towards either self-destructive repression or defiant rejection of his family and class.

4.5. Discussion

In *Maurice*, the Symbolic Order, embodied by religion, law, school, and family, operates as the omnipresent Other that violently enforces heteronormative conformity, fracturing Maurice's subjectivity. Voyant's cross-institutional analysis confirms the Symbolic Order's systematic violence: Religion's moral condemnation, legal criminalization, educational indoctrination, and familial erasure collectively suppress his homosexual identity, leaving Maurice with a profound sense of dissonance and alienation. This institutional coercion not only distorts his self-perception but also constructs a fragmented subjectivity where his true identity is relegated to the shadows, only to be expressed in clandestine moments away from the watchful eyes of society.

As Forster himself noted in the terminal note, Maurice must either smash them or be smashed himself, with no third option [22]. Maurice ultimately chooses rebellion, rejecting religious rituals like church attendance and communion, defying legal norms by embracing an outlaw identity, abandoning institutional obedience through truancy, and resisting maternal authority. Maurice and Alec eventually live in the "*greenwood*", which serves as a natural realm devoid of prescriptive societal codes that allows them to dismantle the imposed symbolic constructs. In this context, Maurice enters the Real Order, the residue of failed symbolization and the recognition of the difference between the self and its mirror image, which continues to construct his subjectivity by allowing him to embrace his authentic homosexuality.

5. Conclusion

This Lacanian reading of Maurice, enhanced through Voyant Tools' computational analysis, reveals Forster's

subversive exploration of queer subjectivity through the protagonist's navigation of Lacan's tripartite orders. Text-mining evidence demonstrates how Maurice's unconscious desires in the Real Order manifest as irrepressible homosexual urges and trauma from George's abandonment, exposing a fractured psyche shaped by cultural erasure. His subsequent rebellion against the Symbolic Order's heteronormative structures – religion, law, and familial duty – demonstrates Forster's critique of ideological conformity as existential annihilation.

The Imaginary Order bridges Maurice's internal and external conflicts, particularly through his idealization of Clive as a mirror and rival. This illusory wholeness shatters when confronting societal prohibitions, propelling him toward an outlaw existence that paradoxically achieves authenticity through social exile. The novel's resolution rejects Symbolic assimilation, privileging Real Order authenticity over bourgeois respectability.

Through this digitally-enhanced analysis of Maurice's trajectory from fractured subjectivity to defiant self-creation, we highlight Forster's radical argument: queer survival necessitates escaping the Symbolic's disciplinary apparatus. Future research could investigate Maurice's ultimate return to the Real Order as both queer liberation and tragic isolation, particularly through his forest union with Alec as a space beyond symbolic law. By integrating Lacanian theory with computational text analysis, this study advances the understanding of Maurice Hall's complex subject construction while pioneering interdisciplinary approaches to queer literary studies.

Such methodology offers scholars a framework to explore marginalized subjectivities where non-normative identities dismantle oppressive symbolic systems. Though preliminary, this interpretation invites further dialogue between psychoanalytic theory and digital humanities, encouraging nuanced investigations into how literature both reflects and reimagines the boundaries of subject formation.

Author Contributions

Bao Chen: Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft

Yanwei Cai: Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Funding

Funding for Student Extracurricular Research Projects of South China Normal University.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Lacan, J. (1999). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge Book XX* (B. Fink, Trans.) (p. 27). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [2] Manjunath, C. B. (2017). International Conference on the influence of Neo-Freudian theories in 20th-century literature. In L. Mathew & G. R. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the international conference on the influence of Neo-Freudian theories in 20th-century literature* (pp. 97-104). SFS College Publications.
- [3] Lacan, J. (1998). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis Book XI* (A. Sheridan, Trans.) (p. 9-32). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [4] Lacan, J. (1991). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique* (J. Forrester, Trans.) (p. 17-50). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [5] Lacan, J. (1997). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Psychoses (Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III* (R. Grigg, Trans.) (p. 12-46). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [6] Lacan, J. (1976). L'impromptu sur le discours analytique. *Scilicet*, 62-63.
- [7] Lacan, J. (2007). *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (B. Fink, Trans.) (p. 24-64). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [8] Žižek, S. (2002). *Welcome to the desert of the real: Five essays on September 11 and related dates* (p. 15). Verso Books.
- [9] Žižek, S. (2006). *How to read Lacan* (p. 55). W. W. Norton & Company.
- [10] Shin, H. W. (2019). A Lacanian reading of Harold Pinter's The Room. *The Journal of English Cultural Studies*, 12(3), 153-185. <https://doi.org/10.15732/JECS.12.3.201912.153>
- [11] Park, J.-S. (2024). Reading Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure through Lacanian theory: Focusing on the attempts to combat the symbolic order. *British and American Fiction*, 31(2), 5-30.
- [12] Popa, B. (2024). Why queer theory cannot eliminate the tragic: The conflict of methods in comparative literature. *Transilvania*, 8(2024), 32-42. <https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2024.08.03>
- [13] Watson, A. (2020). 'Flat pieces of cardboard stamped with a conventional design': Women and narrative exclusion in E. M. Forster's Maurice. In E. Sutton & T.-H. Tsai (Eds.), *Twenty-first-century readings of E. M. Forster's Maurice* (pp. 101-126). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781789621808.003.0005>
- [14] Bristow, J. (2020). 'An unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort': E. M. Forster, Maurice and the legacy of aestheticism. In E. Sutton & T.-H. Tsai (Eds.), *Twenty-first-century readings of E. M. Forster's 'Maurice'* (pp. 45-68). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781789621808.003.0002>
- [15] Bateman, B. (2020). Avian, anal, outlaw: Queer ecology in E. M. Forster's Maurice. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 27(1), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa015>
- [16] Putra, B. P. (2021). Homosexual identity development in E. M. Forster's Maurice: How characters accept their homosexuality. *CELT: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching and Literature*, 13(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.55.41>
- [17] Sinclair, S., & Rockwell, G. (2012). Voyant Tools. Web application. <https://voyant-tools.org/>
- [18] Shvetsova, T., Dulova, S., & Shakhova, V. (2023). Voyant tools as an analysis instrument of Pierre-Louis Le Roy's text. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 420, 06008. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202342006008>
- [19] Fatima, A., Ahmad, S., & Masood, M. H. (2025). A corpus-based stylistic analysis of the Harry Potter series. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL*, 8(2), 1323-1337.
- [20] Forster, E. M. (1971). *Maurice*. Edward Arnold.
- [21] Messenger, N. (1991). *How to study an E. M. Forster novel* (pp. 23-28). Macmillan.
- [22] Sedgwick, E. K. (1985). *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire* (p. 21). Columbia University Press.
- [23] Tao, J. (2003). *The evolution of cultural identity: A study on the novels and thoughts of E. M. Forster* (p. 16). China Social Sciences Publishing House.
- [24] Plato. (2006). Symposium. In C. D. C. Reeve (Ed.), *Plato on love* (A. Nehamas & P. Woodruff, Trans., pp. 1-29). Hackett Publishing.
- [25] Coleman, P. (1982). Christian attitudes to homosexuality. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 36(12), 550-568. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1980.0304_743.x
- [26] Tamagne, F. (2015). *A history of homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939* (p. 32). Verso.

Biography



Bao Chen is a student at South China Normal University, School of Foreign Studies. He entered South China Normal University in 2023.



Yanwei Cai is a student at South China Normal University, School of Foreign Studies. She entered South China Normal University in 2023.



Junfeng Zhan is an associate professor at South China Normal University, School of Foreign Studies. He joined South China Normal University in 2008.

Research Field

Bao Chen: Literature Criticism, Lacanian Studies, Queer Literature, English Writing Motivation, Sociolinguistics.

Yanwei Cai: Literature Criticism, Lacanian Studies, Queer Literature, English Writing Motivation, Sociolinguistics.

Junfeng Zhan: Masculinity Studies, Literary Theory and Criticism, Translation Practice (with a focus on Social Science Translation).