



## The echo

*The following extract represents one of the turning points in the novel. Aziz and Adela Quested set out for the Kawa Dol, while Mrs Moore stays behind and goes through the devastating effect the visit to the Marabar Caves has had on her.*

Edward Morgan Forster  
*A Passage to India*  
(1924)

Chapter 14

'Quite right, now enjoy yourselves, and when you come back tell me all about it.' And she sank into the **deckchair**.

If they reached the big pocket of caves, they would be away nearly an hour. She took out her writing-pad and began, 'Dear Stella, Dear Ralph,' then stopped, and looked at the **queer**<sup>1</sup> valley and their **feeble**<sup>2</sup> invasion of it. Even the elephant had become a nobody. Her eye rose from it to the entrance tunnel. No, she did not wish to repeat that experience. The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became. She minded it much more now than at the time. The **crush** and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine<sup>3</sup> her **hold** on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced<sup>4</sup> to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur: 'Pathos, **piety**, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is **filth**. Everything exists, nothing has value.' If one had spoken **vileness** in that place, or quoted lofty<sup>5</sup> poetry, the comment would have been the same – 'ou-boum'. If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for<sup>6</sup> all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo<sup>7</sup> whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge or bluff<sup>8</sup> – it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar, because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them<sup>9</sup> to **mankind**.

She tried to go on with her letter, reminding herself that she was only an elderly woman who had got up too early in the morning and journeyed too far, that the despair creeping over her<sup>10</sup> was merely her despair, her personal weakness, and that even if she got a sunstroke and went mad the rest of the world would go on. But suddenly, at the **edge** of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from 'Let there be light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum'. Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realized that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God. She sat motionless with horror, and, when old Mohammed Latif came up to her, thought he would notice a difference. For a time she thought, 'I am going to be ill,' to comfort herself, then she surrendered to the vision. She lost all interest, even in Aziz, and the affectionate and sincere words that she had spoken to him seemed no longer hers but the air's.

- 1 **queer**. Strana.
- 2 **feeble**. Fiacca, debole.
- 3 **undermine**. Minare, scardinare.
- 4 **she chanced**. Le capitava, le accadeva.
- 5 **lofty**. Elevata.
- 6 **pleaded for**. Chiesto grazia per, chiesto di intercedere per.
- 7 **undergo**. Subire.
- 8 **they dodge or bluff**. Sfuggano o ingannino.
- 9 **that accommodates them**. Che le adatti.
- 10 **creeping over her**. Che si stava impossessando di lei.

### LITERARY COMPETENCE

#### > VOCABULARY

#### 1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- |                            |                                     |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 religious devotion ..... | 5 control .....                     |
| 2 evilness .....           | 6 human race .....                  |
| 3 border .....             | 7 folding chair used outdoors ..... |
| 4 crowd .....              | 8 dirt, corruption .....            |



---

➤ COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

**2 READ** the text again and make notes about

- what Mrs Moore tries to do once she is alone;
- how she feels;
- what memory disturbs her most;
- why the Marabar caves cannot be romanticised;
- the rational explanation she tries to find for what is happening to her;
- what crisis she undergoes.

---

➤ COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

**3 SAY** how the passage is narrated.

**4 DISCUSS** the symbolical meaning of the caves. What is their effect on the visitor? What view of nature is conveyed in the text?

**5 EXPLAIN** why the 'ou-boum' becomes so terrifying.

**6 IDENTIFY** the main theme in the text.

**7 FOCUS** on Mrs Moore. What vision does she surrender to? What meaning do the last lines acquire?

---

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE

**8 COMPARE** Mrs Moore's experience with Kurtz's and Marlow's experiences in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (→ 6.16).

**9 DISCUSS.** Some critics have argued that the novel draws upon early fertility rites, with Mrs Moore as a kind of sacrificial god. Explain how this reading seems to connect Forster's novel with Eliot's *The Waste Land* (→ 6.14, T92).

---

➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

**10 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to justify the following statement: 'A *Passage to India* retains little of the qualified optimism that shines through Forster's earlier fiction.'

**11 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to comment this statement: 'A *Passage to India* moves from physical reality to a complete denial of it, into the mystery of the universe.'