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## A Thematic Study of John Galsworthy's Plays

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### Abstract

The English novelist and playwright John Galsworthy (1867-1933) was one of the most popular writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work explores the transitions and contrasts between pre-and post-World War I England. Literary career of English novelist and playwright John Galsworthy, who used John Sinjohn as a pseudonym, spanned the Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian eras. In addition to his prolific literary status, Galsworthy was also a renowned social activist. He was an outspoken advocate for the women's suffrage movement, prison reform and animal rights. Galsworthy was the president of PEN, an organization that sought to promote international cooperation through literature. John Galsworthy was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1932. He is far better known for his novels and particularly The Forsyte Saga, the first of three trilogies of novels about the eponymous family and connected lives. These books, as with many of his other works, dealt with class, and in particular upper-middle class lives. Although sympathetic to his characters, he highlights their insular, snobbish, and acquisitive attitudes and their suffocating moral codes. He is viewed as one of the first writers of the Edwardian era; challenging in his works some of the ideals of society depicted in the proceeding literature of Victorian England. His work is often less convincing when it deals with the changing face of wider British society and how it affects people of the lower social classes. Through his writings he campaigned for a variety of causes, including prison reform, women's rights, animal welfare, and censorship, but these have limited appeal outside the era in which they were written. Galsworthy was also a successful dramatist, his plays, written in a naturalistic style, usually examining some controversial ethical or social problem. They include The Silver Box (1906), which, like many of his other works, has a legal theme and depicts a bitter contrast of the law's treatment of the rich and the poor; Strife (1909), a study of industrial relations; Justice (1910), a realistic portrayal of prison life that roused so much feeling that it led to reform; and Loyalties (1922), the best of his later plays.

Keywords : Pseudonym, eponymous family, women's right, snobbish

## Introduction

John Galsworthy became known for his portrayal – often with a satiric tone – of the British upper-middle class. His most famous novel is *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921), an English parallel to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901). A representative of the literary tradition, which has regarded the novel as an instrument of social debate, Galsworthy believed that it was the duty of an artist to examine a problem, but not to provide a solution. Before starting his literary career, Galsworthy read widely the works of Kipling, Zola, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Flaubert.

*“When a Forsyte was engaged, married, or born, the Forsytes were present; when a Forsyte died – but no Forsyte has as yet died; they did not die; death being contrary to their principles, they took precautions against it, the instinctive precautions of highly vitalized persons who resent encroachments on their property.” (from The Forsyte Saga)*

Although Galsworthy is best known for his novels, he was also a successful playwright. He constructed his drama on a legalistic basis, and the plays typically start from a social or ethical impulse and reach a resolution after different viewpoints have been expressed. Like *The Silver Box* (1906) and *Strife* (1909), *Justice* (1910) is realistic, particularly in the use of dialogue that is direct and uninflated. Part of the realism is an awareness of detail and the minute symbol. That awareness is clear in the intricate symbols of *The Forsyte Saga*; it is less successful in the drama and his later novels because it tends to be overstated.

In *Justice* Galsworthy revealed himself as something of a propagandist or, according to Joseph Conrad, “a moralist.” Galsworthy selected detail and character to isolate a belief or a judgment; he said, “Selection, conscious or unconscious, is the secret of art.” The protagonists in his drama and his prose fiction generally typify particular viewpoints or beliefs. Explaining his method of characterization, he wrote, “In the greatest fiction the characters, or some of them, should sum up and symbolize whole streaks of human nature in a way that our friends, however well known to us, do not.... Within their belts are cinctured not only individuals but sections of mankind.” He also stated that his aim was to create a fictional world that was richer than life itself.

*Loyalties* is one of the first plays to deal honestly and openly with the problem of anti-Semitism. Galsworthy takes such pains to deal fairly with both sides of the question, however, that he comes close to destroying his own thesis. The most completely drawn character is probably Captain Dancy, a man of action trying to adjust himself to a static society and finding an outlet in anti-social behaviour.

*MABEL and RONALD DANCY enter. She is a pretty young woman with bobbed hair, fortunately, for she has just got out of bed, and is in her nightgown and a wrapper. DANCY is in his smoking jacket. He has a pale, determined face with high cheekbones, small, deep-set dark eyes, reddish crisp hair, and looks like a horseman.*

Although he does not ask us to condone Dancy's behaviour, Galsworthy certainly enables us to understand it. Having retired from His Majesty's service, young Captain Ronald Dancy, D.S.O., was at loose ends as to what to do with himself. Accustomed to a life of action, he at first absorbed himself in horses and women, but he found in neither the violent excitement he craved. His stable was so expensive that he was at last forced to give his Rosemary filly to his friend, Ferdinand De Levis, because he could no longer afford to keep her. As for his women, he decided to throw them all over and marry a woman who admired him, and who had the spirit which Ronny desired in his wife.

In spite of the fact that he was obviously penniless, Ronny managed to keep his memberships in his favourite London clubs, and friends invited him and his wife to their weekend parties in the country. At Meldon Court, the home of his old friend, Charles Winsor, Ronny discovered that De Levis had sold for a thousand pounds the horse Ronny had given him. He was naturally embittered by the discovery, and later in the evening his resentment prompted him to bet De Levis ten pounds that he could jump to the top of a bookcase four feet high. He won his bet, but De Levis was contemptuous of a man who would indulge in such parlor games for the sake of a little money. What Ronny never knew was that both he and De Levis were victims of social conventions. Because Ronny belonged, his friends had been loyal. But loyalty, as they now realized, was not enough.

In an early essay on dramatic theory, John Galsworthy stated that the playwright's best and most honest approach is to present to his audience the true picture of life as he sees it, without fear or favor, and let the audience draw its own conclusions. Few of his plays follow that dictum as completely and effectively as *Loyalties*. Indeed, he has so balanced his sympathies that anyone searching the play for vindication of a particular viewpoint—such as an attack on anti-Semitism—is certain to be disappointed. *Loyalties* is not about prejudice as such; it is, as the title implies, about “loyalties”—their nature, their effects, and their excesses.

What is the line, the playwright asks, between “prejudices” and “loyalties”? To what extent is loyalty to a set or class or group or profession a necessary social virtue? And at what point do these same loyalties become questionable, even dangerous? Using the rarefied atmosphere of cultivated upper-class British society in the 1920's, Galsworthy subtly explores these questions in all their complexity and ambiguity, while at the same time telling a powerful personal story of wasted talent and inadvertent self-destruction.

Galsworthy chooses to focus his conflict on anti-Semitism because the ambiguous position of the Jew in upper-class English society makes him the perfect catalyst for a play in which all of the “loyalties” present in such a group are to be tested. Because of his money and social contacts, Ferdinand De Levis, associates with the group, but, because of his race, he is barely tolerated by it. When he accuses Ronald Dancy, one of the most accepted and well-liked members of the set, the thin veneer of courtesy dissolves and the group's latent prejudices quickly become overt. For his own part, De Levis is probably hypersensitive in his assumption that all reaction against his claims are racially motivated.

But it is unwise to overemphasize the anti-Semitic aspect of the play. Most of the characters are decent and, under pressure, do the honest thing. They are simply trying to keep faith with their own particular set. The problem is that, in one character's words, “loyalties cut up against each other.” De Levis' intensity in pursuit of the thief is not due to the money itself, but to the vindication of what he feels to be a racial insult. Charles Winsor is loyal to his idea of hospitality and reacts strongly when he feels it affronted. General Canynge is loyal to his military esprit de corps ethic and so finds it impossible to believe that Dancy, a good soldier, could be a thief. Margaret Orme and Major Colford are loyal to feelings of friendship. Ricardos is loyal to his daughter. Old Twisden is loyal to his concept of the lawyer's obligation to truth and justice. And, finally, Mabel Dancy is loyal to her husband in spite of what she learns about him. Clearly, the loyalties are not bad in themselves, but, given the momentum of the situation, some of them take on wrong and dangerous aspects.

At the Center of these conflicting loyalties is the character who is both the villain and the victim in the play, Captain Ronald Dancy. He is a colourful mixture of arrogant snob and likeable daredevil. The negative aspects of his character are most evident at the beginning of the play when he is brash, snide, and overtly anti-Semitic. But later on Dancy exhibits many positive qualities: personal charm, courage, devotion and loyalty toward his wife, and a strong sense of honor. His real misfortune is to be a natural born soldier thrust into a peaceful world and a trivial social class. The pressure of needing money to settle accounts with his previous mistress, the feeling that he had been cheated by De Levis, and the need for an adventure, all push Dancy to his daring, dangerous crime. And, when he is found out, his honour demands his life as expiation; “only a pistol keeps faith,” his suicide note explains. But Galsworthy, speaking through Margaret Orme, makes the final comment: “Keeps faith! We've all done that. It's not enough.”

As a novelist Galsworthy reflects the contemporary interest in sociological problems. His most important works give an objective, ironical portrait of the upper-middle class to which he himself belonged. They are earnest and sincere analyses of its weakness and inadequacies, and, like his plays, show him to be primarily a social critic. Class rather than character is his concern, and even his best characters are to a considerable extent types: motive and impulse are of secondary importance to him. He is a realist with a keen and accurate observation, and handles his material with a restraint, delicacy, and impartiality which at once prompt the description ‘gentlemanly’. His chief weapon is irony, and his satire is kept well in hand. His dialogue has the naturalness that we expect of the. Author of the plays, and his style has the polished ease and urbanity which are ideal for his type of fiction, but it can, and does, reflect deep feelings.

As a dramatist Galsworthy belongs to the realist tradition of Jones and Pinero. He says himself in a magazine article “Some Platitudes concerning Drama” (Fortnightly Review, December 1909): “Every grouping of life and character has its inherent moral; and the business of the dramatist is so to pose the group as to bring that moral poignantly to the light of day,” and his plays are all didactic in purpose. Galsworthy was a social reformer, objectively and impartially posing a problem, showing always both sides of the question, and leaving his audience to think out the answer. His chief protagonists are usually social, forces in conflict with each other, and the human concern in his drama, though real enough and very true to ordinary life, are studied more as products of these forces than as individuals who are of interest for their own sake. To this extent they are types. But, in spite of his apparent detachment, Galsworthy obviously feels a warm sympathy for the victims of social injustice, and especially for the poor and downtrodden, and the underlying warmth of his drama is one of the qualities which distinguishes him most clearly from Granville-Barker. Where the latter is almost exclusively intellectual in appeal, Galsworthy calls into play the feelings as well as the mind of his audience. His characters are well studied and his psychological insight is particularly well seen in his studies of internal conflict. In the construction of his plays he shows a fine sense of form, and the best of them are excellent stage pieces. His dialogue and situations are natural, and he never lapses into sentimentality or melodramatic distortion. His legal training shows itself in his frequent studies of social problems arising from the injustices of the law, in the excellent trial scenes found in his plays, and, perhaps above all, in the clarity of vision with which he followed his deliberately chosen path in the drama.

### Reference:

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