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## Chronical evaluation of John Galsworthy as a modern playwright

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### Abstract

John Galsworthy is universally acclaimed as one of the most eminent playwrights in English drama. Born in 1867, Galsworthy had firsthand experience of the socio-economic reality of both 19<sup>th</sup> as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century, as he left the world for his heavenly abode in 1933. With his analytical mind and keen observation, Galsworthy could capture the inner essence of the reality behind the veil. He had the spirit of rebellion against the socio-economic inequalities, exploitation, hunger, the gulf between has and has not, the capitalist system, the uncaring attitude of society towards. The plight of the poor and miserable, and the sub-human working conditions of industrial workers.

**Keywords:** Socio-economic inequalities, exploitation, industrial worker

### Introduction

Owing to his attitude of championing the cause of the underdogs and the under-privileged sections of society, he has often been accused of being propagandist and a socialist. However, the fact is that Galsworthy was humanist whose heart and pen echoed the sorrows, miseries and pains of the poor and the helpless people in society. Galsworthy's purpose as a playwright was not to propagate the socialist or communist ideas, but to create public awareness about the existence of unparadoxable wrong doing in society.

In the words of B. Ifor Evans: "At his best, he has a gift similar to that of Antony Trollope of making a whole class in society come to life. But he departs from Trollope in Attempting through this portraiture, to assess the values of his age In the firm, broad portrayal of half a century of English life as it appeared to the upper-middle classes Galsworthy has no equal <sup>[1]</sup>. Galsworthy starts his literary career as a novelist. His novels were first published, under his pen name 'John Sir John' and he did not use his own real name until he published 'The Island of Pharisees' in 1904. He became a literary celebrity at the age of 39 when his novel 'The man of property' was published and his play 'The Silver Box' began a successful run at the royal court Theatre. The first of his first novels 'The Man of Property', was published in 1906, and marked the appearance of John Galsworthy in the front rank of English novelists. The title of the novels states the theme – The faith of the Middle Classes in order, and in the material security which is their prime concern. However, when the story opens, there was no security against the demands of feeling and emotions. Galsworthy returned to his propertied family in two novels – 'In Chancery' (1920) and 'To Let' (1921) and brought them into modern life to face social change and threats to their position. 'The White Monkey' (1924), 'The Silver Spoon' m (1926) and 'Swam Song' (1928) follow the lives of the post-war generation, defrauded of the certainties which characterized the lives of the principles of the first three novels. Material and moral certainties recur constantly in their minds, but feelings and emotions are themselves are uncertainties and the skillful evocation of these gives Galsworthy's novels their enduring force and quality.

Galsworthy enjoyed the continued success both as a novelist and as a playwright, but his greatest fame is as the chronicler of middle class and lower middle class life in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century England. However, because of the element of universality, Galsworthy's work evokes an instant echo in the hearts of readers or viewers all over the world. Galsworthy based his plays on social and contemporary problems. His theatrical success began with began with 'Strife' (1909) and 'Justice' (1910) and continued in a

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number of later plays including 'Loyalties' (1922). Some times it appears that Galsworthy formulated and selected social problem rather blatantly and his characterization is simple. While the blame for the social problem is emphasized strongly. Though his plays are mostly well-constructed, the mechanism tends to remain apparent. His sense of pity was controlled usually by his intelligence but it was. Mostly in danger of becoming excessive. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century playwrights such as Bernard Shaw and Galsworthy, felt a sense of commitment towards – society and their great plays highlight their social consciousness. The desire for liberty in domestic, and in moral circles was by the desire for liberty in social life.

In this scenario, the playwrights become aware of the depressing circumstances in which the poor are fated to dwell: They viewed the squalor and the misery of the city; they looked around and saw the terror of modern civilization.

In this context, Allordyce Nicoll observes: "The class-war, which has found its expressions in actual life, was freely dealt with by the never school, cynically yet profoundly by men such as Mr. Bernard Shaw, seriously by men such as Mr. Galsworthy [2].

Besides Shaw, Galsworthy's other great theatrical contemporaries included Granville Barker and John Masfield who are known for their treatment of domestic and social problems in their plays which may be categorized as domestic tragedies. A subtle influence of the contemporary trend of social commitment, is seen in many of Galsworthy's plays such as 'The Silver Box' (1906), 'Strife' (1909), 'Justice' (1910), 'The Pigeon' (1912), 'The Eldest Son' (1912), 'The Fugitive' (1913), 'The Mob' (1914), 'The Skin Game' (1920), and 'Loyalties' (1922). These plays portray Galsworthy's keen dramatic activity, keen observation and logical analysis of problems.

Highlighting the features of Galsworthy's plays, Allordyce Nicoll observes: "All of his plays exhibit the same features -the omnipresence of a fundamental social problem expressed in a severely natural manner, without straining situation or exaggeration of final issues; a corresponding naturalism of dialogue, leading at times to an apparent ordinariness; A motive kindness of heart add it to the sternness of the true tragic artist; and a complete absence of sentimentalism even when pitiful scenes are introduced. These forms the most marked outward features of Mr. Galsworthy's realistic theatre [3].

Instead of taking up Kings, Queens, nobleman and aristocrats as his dramatic characters, he took up ordinary men and women as the heroes and heroines of his plays. Since his plays habitually deal with the socio-economic or psychological problems confronting men and women in society, his common heroes and heroines acquire a life-like quality. Some critics have gone to the extent of remarking that instead of taking as her heroes and heroines the men of individualistic and great qualities; he has adopted the faiths, idea and forces of modern social values. When George Bernard Shaw reduced that old Victorian ideal hero Napoleon Bonaparte to a rather ordinary human being, in 'The Plan of destiny', and displayed Cleopatra as an immature young woman. He was only doing cynically what Galsworthy would do seriously. The age of hero-worship seemed to be over, at least for dramatists like. Shaw and Galsworthy. The class-war which confronted men and women in 20<sup>th</sup> century society was actually the creation of

unequal and exploitative 20<sup>th</sup> century social conditions. Playwrights like Galsworthy felt that it was their solemn duty to expose the real face of so called progressive modern civilization, and of such, as W. H. Hudson rightly remarks: "His plays seemed to be humanitarian tracts [4].

Galsworthy began his literary career in a period of rich experiment in rendering the inwardness of human experience and in testing and renewing humane values in the social context. Some critics unfairly felt that Galsworthy was artistically an obstructive conservative, severely limited to a vision of the outside of social phenomena, and to a merely social definition of human beings. These critics overlook the fact that as a dramatist Galsworthy was one of those in the first decade of the century who restored to the English theatre a substantiality of subject matter which had long been missing from it. In the words of Marion Wynne Davis: "His plays dramatized ethical problems arising from social issues [5].

Another allegation against Galsworthy plays is that he brought to the theatre a novelist's vision rather than a dramatist's vision. This is akin to cardinal sin in the eyes of any critics who feel that drama requires an approach to the depiction of character and to the use of dialogue which is different from the vision of a novelist. These critics. However overlook the positive side, because after entering the domain of drama, Galsworthy had brought with him. The novelist's keen observation, enumeration of the minute details and analysis of the external and internal features of persons and events. All these novelistic traits did not hinder Galsworthy's dramatic art, but rather enriched it and added the flavor of freshness. Galsworthy also often employed his favorable dramatic device of presenting parallel and contrasted families-one rich, the other poor, one happy, the other miserable. The contrast actually helps in highlighting the desired aspects or features of the plays. Unlike most writers or playwrights, Galsworthy did not believe in just literary presentation of social or economic wrong doings to bring about or create social awareness. He believed in bringing about practical social reforms through his plays, and he succeeded to a great extent in this noble aim. For instance his play 'Justice' (1910) led to reform of the practice of solitary confinement in England. The play 'Strife' (1909) realistically depicted the effects of an industrial strike, and led to a better understanding between British industrialists and trade, unions. His play 'Skin Game' (1920) is a commentary on jealously guarded privilege and social snobbery, and it had a chastening effect upon the British Aristocrats. In the words of Ian Ousby, "Galsworthy's play comment on social injustices [6]. As a result although his plays have brought about wide ranging, social reforms in British society, and received critical acclaim across the globe still his plays have not been able to acquire wide popularity because of the seriousness in tone, subject matter and manner of presentation. However, we have to remember that many popular writers in the contemporary era are forgotten by posterity but many less popular writers, stand. The test of time and acquire immortality in the history of literature. Galsworthy belongs to their later category of writers who lacked excessive adulation or popular acclaim in their life time, but have become immortal names in the literary domain. Galsworthy's lasting impact upon critics, viewers and readers is due to his honesty and sincerity of purpose, and as David Daiches observes: "Galsworthy's plays are

humanitarian fables of social and moral worry They command respect and sympathy for their technical competence and humane feeling.”

### **Conclusion**

Galsworthy's plays discuss contemporary events and issues, but only those which are of universal nature. Owing to this quality of universality, Galsworthy's plays remain relevant for our Modern age and they would remain relevant for all subsequent ages. Some critics unfairly find Galsworthy's plays dated or out of tune with the modern ethos but we have to remember that universal human feelings and sentiments remain relevant for every age and every generation. In spite of some minor blemishes in technical terms as well as lack of humor to lighten the serious moments, Galsworthy's plays are included in the highest rank of plays in world drama.

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