

JOHN GALSWORTHY:  
THE MAN AND HIS PLAYS  
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## INTRODUCTION

It is a great honour for me to have an opportunity to carry out research into John Galsworthy's life and works, his plays in particular. He was a novelist as well as a playwright and his place in literature was considerable during the early twentieth century.

Galsworthy did not begin his writing career until he was 30 years old. How he came to enter the literary world and what he came to deal with in his writing are both unexpected: he had embarked upon a legal career, having come from a wealthy, middle-class family which had never experienced the bitterness of poverty or injustice. In material things his life seemed quite a perfect one: a happy family life as a boy, a good education leading to a steady career in law, with a comfortable private income. All along he seemed to have been blessed with an innate humanism, and far from contentedly accepting the life and pattern of the society into which he seemed to fit so comfortably, he found himself strongly critical of it. He accused the English upper and middle classes of being hypocrites and of showing indifference and inhumanity towards the poor and the less fortunate. When he came to write -- quite suddenly abandoning law after discovering his literary talent -- it was this sentiment which found expression in his plays and novels.

In writing my thesis, I wish to concentrate on his dramas which form a large proportion of his written work. (To sum up, his production consists of 17 novels, 27 plays, 12 volumes of collected stories, essays, belles lettres, and his poems.)

I came across Galsworthy during my research into Ibsen's dramas. After finishing The Silver Box, I had a great desire to go on reading the rest of his plays. As an English playwright, he was one of the pioneers who, like Ibsen of Norway, boldly took up the controversial issues of his day and criticized the defects of society. Before his time, English drama was far from being realistic. Writers tried to take their readers away from the real world to an imaginary one. It was Galsworthy and some other contemporary writers such as Shaw who made a successful attempt to bring them back to face facts and if possible to solve the burning problems of their every-day lives. The plays not only showed how Galsworthy had, after Ibsen, developed a trend towards

realism and expounded his themes with almost the heavy hand of Ibsen, but they also created a vivid image of the life and condition of certain sections of society in his day.

In passing, one might ask whether Galsworthy's social dramas were of any effect or not? The answer is positive. "His message created a dent in the public consciousness and called in question very many, then apparently inflexible rules of society and human conduct".<sup>1</sup> Some of his plays also brought about certain reforms, the clearest example of such being his play Justice which led to the reduction of prison sentences of solitary confinement and to prison reforms both in England and America.

Moreover, as a thinker with prophetic and imaginative insight, Galsworthy seemed to foretell certain happenings and changes in society. He wrote about an industrial strike in Strife (1909) long before the British General Strike really occurred (1926). The implicit message in The Little Man (1924) is the need for a spirit of internationalism which did in fact later find expression in the League of Nations (1925). There is even a surprising passage in one of his novels, The White Monkey, (written in 1922) in which he seems to foresee the press - button warfare of the atomic age.

One might say that Galsworthy's plays are too serious. But the lack of humour in his plays is always compensated for by his exemplary theatrical skill. "He had," says a famous book reviewer, Frank A. Swinnerton, "An altogether exceptional sense of the theatre, which makes his plays very effective pieces. .... some of his plays will continue to be performed as long as there are repertory theatres in the world. Their freshness may go -- it has already gone from the lesser plays; their interest as comments upon social conditions will assuredly lessen; but they are such good theatre, and they still read with so much life, that they will survive fashion and enter history".<sup>2</sup>

1. R.H. Mottram : John Galsworthy (1953)

2. Frank Swinnerton : The Georgian Literary Scene (1946),

Lack of bibliographical material in Thailand has compelled me to rely largely on H.V. Marrot's Life and Letters of John Galsworthy (1935) for information about productions of Galsworthy's plays and the public's attitude to them. Since Marrot's definitive biography there seems to have been little of note added to the Galsworthy bibliography except some personal reminiscences by his wife and sister and R.H. Mottram's short study published for the British Council and the National Book League in 1953. Mottram, like most people who knew Galsworthy personally, writes very subjectively, and it is difficult to find much objective criticism in him or in notices quoted by Marrot. People either knew Galsworthy and loved him, or they read his works -- and unable to view them detachedly -- they praised or attacked them for personal reasons. (D.H. Lawrence is a case in point). Perhaps at this distance -- a distance in time and place -- we can attempt a new survey and an assessment of the qualities in Galsworthy's work that have significance for us that lie behind Swinnerton's appraisal quoted above.

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