
The Making of a Writer: A Critical Study of John Galsworthy's Legal and Literature Background with reference to his Readership**Mr. T. S. Varadharajan***Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities and Sciences, SASTRA University, Thanjavur, (T.N.) India***Dr. B. Krishnamurthy***Formerly Professor and Head, Dept. of English, Srinivasa Ramanujan Centre, SASTSRA University, Thanjavur, (T.N.) India***Abstract**

This article aims at exploring the different stages of Galsworthy's career as a writer of Novels, Plays, Essays, Short Stories and his legal acumen though he has not practiced law. While studying his knowledge in Law and his interest towards writing a variety of genres, the writers who influenced him most to make him a writer par excellence would also be discussed in detail. After reading this article, the writer of this paper firmly believes that it is unique in understanding the many-sided personalities of Galsworthy.

Key Words: John Galsworthy, influences, readership**Galsworthy's Legal Acumen:**

Galsworthy's solicitor father decided that his son should be a lawyer. Galsworthy read law at Oxford, somewhat lackadaisically, from 1886 to 1889. He continued his studies in London, at Lincoln's Inn, from 1890 to 1894, and was called to the bar on 29 April, 1890. He had already been introduced to legal practice, for his father entrusted him with several cases in which his clients were interested. Among other things, he had to draw up his own family tree, in order to sort out a particularly thorny inheritance dispute.

It was probably in 1892 that his father encouraged him to turn to maritime law. His 1892-1893 voyage to the South Seas was also intended to familiarize him with certain aspects of maritime affairs. His

father obviously had ambitions for him, hoping that he would specialize and become an authority on maritime law. These hopes were to be disappointed. From the meager information available about Galsworthy the man of law, his official biographer concludes that he practiced very little. Some time in 1984 he abandoned his profession as a lawyer. However his legal acumen was evident in his works especially his dramas and his magnum opus *The Forsyte Saga* for which he was given Nobel Prize for Literature.

His novels and plays give considerable space to lawyers, judges, surveyors, solicitors, notaries and clerks, as well as to accounts of prisons, prison staff and conditions. What he was mainly interested in was legal practice, and jurisprudence, and

for this purpose he used his knowledge of the procedures and arguments that lawyers are prone to engage in. It was a vast field, on which he could exercise his sense of humour, and often his satirical gift.

He made discreet though effective efforts to bring about changes in legislation in several areas. He was particularly concerned with divorce law, and with regulations on solitary confinement. On both these points he argued passionately for liberalization of the law. And the reactions aroused by his play, *Justice* did, indeed, lead to changes in rules governing solitary confinement. So he looked hard at the system of justice, in many cases found it extremely unjust, and denounced it or helped to reform it. In this humane attitude, he was well ahead of his time.

He was, himself, greatly influenced by his legal training. The accuracy, meticulousness and consummate skill with which he relates so many trials and legal procedures of all kinds, pleas, cross-examinations, inquiries, verdicts, identification of victims or guilty parties, herrings of witnesses, jury deliberations, show that, in spite of appearances, he had not been an entirely idle student of law. When his sister Lilian reproached him for giving away family secrets in *The Man of Property*, he replied that, for him, it was not a matter of being for or against any particular character: 'I feel more like a short of chemist, more cold, more dissective' (Marrot, 796)

The reference to practically anatomy, in which the medical student trains himself to achieve the greatest possible insensitivity, is

significant. Looking for clues, analyzing circumstances, understanding motives, immediate or remote causes, may have been a purely intellectual game for him at first. Later, when he felt involved, certain habits of rigour and fairness were already ingrained, and they conferred greater subtlety and depth on his work.

His descriptions of legal proceedings show how skillfully he could put himself in the place of the judge, or of either counsel. Both barrister and judge are seeking the truth. But the barrister is interested in only the part of it that is favourable to his client. It may well have been this obligation to be one-sided that made the legal profession so distasteful to Galsworthy. He would rather have seen himself as the judge, and would have made a good one. (Vergnas, 45)

Galsworthy's background in Literature and his fondness for Writers:

At Harrow, as he says, he was given no taste for literature or history. At the age of twenty-two, he wrote in an album belonging to a female cousin that his favourite authors were Thackeray, Dickens (he was particularly fond of *The Pickwick Papers*), and Whyte-Melville. His admiration for Dumas's *Three Musketeers* and *Count of Monte Cristo*, Robert Louis Stevenson's novels (*Carrion and The Master of Ballantrae*), and one of Mark Twain's greatest stories, *Huckleberry Finn*, no doubt dates from his youth. He believed that Hardy's novels could not be compared with those of Stevenson, which he found far livelier. He also said that he loved Conrad's 'greatest works'. (Marrot, 117)

His 1892-93 voyage did much to awaken his literary vocation. One of its purposes was to meet R L Stevenson. Part of the voyage was on board the *Torrens*, where the first mate was Joseph Conrad. This began a friendship that lasted thirty-two years, until Conrad's death. Galsworthy was immediately attracted by the personality of Conrad, eleven years his senior. Conrad already had twenty years of roving to relate, and Galsworthy was a spellbound listener. Conrad had the as yet uncompleted manuscript of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, in his cabin, but this was not discussed. Three years after being on the *Torrens*, Galsworthy published his *Winds*. The figure of Conrad is illustrated in one of the stories, *The Doldrums*. Galsworthy no doubt read Conrad's novels eagerly as they came out in the closing years of the century.

Of another story in the same collection, Galsworthy wrote: 'From the title of that story, "Dick Denver's Idea", you can tell how much of it can be traced to the inspiration of Bret Harte and how much to the influence of Rudyard Kipling' (Marrot, 131). No firm conclusion can be drawn from these rather eclectic, youthful tastes. However, at this stage it may be useful to recall his fondness for two novelists who were very popular in their time, and are far less well known today; the Scotsman George John Whyte-Melville and American Francis Bret Harte.

In a reference to Whyte-Melville, Galsworthy tells that, by dint of reading novels about imperturbably stoic, even though debt-ridden, young dandies, he had come to believe that wearing side-whiskers, being impeccably dressed, and remaining

unaffected by the whims of Fortune, were the golden rules of life. (Marrot, 61)

Bret Harte, founder of the 'school of local colour', presented strongly contrasted characters, adventurous rogues, gamblers, consumed with a lust to win, but in whom a predilection for goodness and devotion lay dormant. And precisely, 'Dick Denver's Idea' offers a very simple and clear moral; woman is sacred. This conception of the weaker sex is to be found in the story *A Knight* and, indeed, throughout Galsworthy's writings. His heroes are always chivalrous towards women.

During his 1893 voyage, Galsworthy also read and reread a little book of quite a different kind, *The Story of an African Farm*, by Oliver Schreiner. It is the first sign of his search for a more sober, sparer style, and also of his interest in agnosticism.

The next phase of his introduction to literature began in 1898. In his attempts to learn the craft of writing, he studied Maupassant and Turgenev intensively in French. These two 'masters' were, he said, 'the first writers who gave me, at once, real aesthetic excitement, and an insight into proportion of theme and economy of words. (Marrot, 136)

These are the only two authors to whom Galsworthy recognized any great debt. In general he denied having undergone literary influences, although such denials cannot be fully accepted. In particular, he never admitted his debt to Conrad, whose name should surely be added to those of Maupassant and Turgenev. According to Harold Vincent Marrot, 'The bookish discussions at Elstree under the presidency

of Conrad had brought him among the ranks of those to whom technique mattered.' (Marrot, 99)

This seems only fair to Conrad the stylist. But the role of literary mentor was played by Edward Garnett, with whom Galsworthy began a regular correspondence from 1900. Garnett did not simply criticize the manuscripts his new friend sent him. He was extremely knowledgeable about contemporary literature, and guided Galsworthy's reading. In a letter of June 1903, for example, he advised Galsworthy to read *Hampshire Days* by W. H. Hudson, and told him, without delay, of the publication of a 'remarkable book', *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler (Garnett, 51). Both these writers were, in different ways, to excite Galsworthy, to such an extent that he heaped over-lavish praise on all their writings. In addition to Hudson's best work, *Green Mansions*, he read *El Ombu*, *The Land's End*, *Idle Days in Patagonia*, *A foot in England*, *Adventures Among Birds*, *A Shepherd's life*, and others, in fact probably all his works. Galsworthy also read the 'nature authors' whose names are often associated with Hudson's: Richard Jefferies, Henry Wood Nevinson, whose *A Modern Slavery* impressed him enormously and Henry Williamson, whose *The Old Stag* and *Tarka the Otter* he praised.

Garnett's wife Constance published translations of the Russian classics, which Galsworthy admired tremendously. Meanwhile, Garnett himself was publishing articles on Russian literature, and a book on Turgenev. On 14 June, 1901, Garnett advised Galsworthy to read the French translation of Gorki's *The Vagabonds*. On

24 April 1910, Galsworthy told him that he had read Maurice Baring's *Landmarks in Russian Literature*, and of his intention to improve his knowledge of Dostoyevsky by reading *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*. Among Tolstoy's works he had read at least *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* (Garnett, 177). Another friend, the classical scholar Gilbert Murray, introduced him to ancient Greece, and to Greek drama in particular.

Bret Harte is not the only American author mentioned by Galsworthy. There are also Henry James, Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, Whittier, Thoreau, Motley, Holmes, Lowell, Sinclair Lewis and Mark Twain, already mentioned. (Marrot, 326)

In a letter in 1914, in which he recognized the merits of D H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, while criticizing its indecency, there is a longer list of 'masters' than before. The list shows fuller knowledge of Russian and French Literature; it includes Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Maupassant, Flaubert, Anatole France. (Garnett, 433). As time passed, the range of authors became even wider, and more English authors are mentioned. In 1920 he advised a young writer to read W. H. Hudson, The Bible, Walter Pater (while putting him on his guard against Pater's preciousness), Samuel Butler, Masfield and Siegfried Sassoon. (Marrot, 778)

A list of major literary and dramatic characters, probably dating from 1923, (Galsworthy, 9) throws further light on his interests: Don Quixote, Sancho Pancho, Hamlet, Lear, Falstaff, Tom Jones, Faust, d' Artagnan, Sam Weller, Betsy Trotwood, Mr.

Micawber, Becky Sharp, Major Pendennis, Bel Ami, Irina, Bazarov, Anna Karenina. There is a further list of short stories which Galsworthy considered masterpieces, and whose authors according to him, had been less successful novelists. (Galsworthy,218) The context shows that he was far from regarding the short story as a minor genre.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Galsworthy legal acumen has been seen through his works especially *The Forsyte Saga* and the play, *Justice*. Though he was not a practicing lawyer, he made it very clear in his works that he had been familiar with different laws, especially divorce laws and the laws that would impact

prison reforms. He was against solitary confinement. His societal responsibilities had been delineated very well through the portrayal of many characters. Also Galsworthy's knowledge of literature was both extensive and restricted. He was familiar with only a short period of French literature. He appears to have known nothing of German, Italian and Spanish literature (except for Don Quixote). On the other hand, he was far more at home in English literature than his own statements might lead one to expect. He loved the Greek and great 19th century Russian classics. Details of all his reading would cover many pages, and provide a comprehensive catalogue of literary works.

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