



Critical Analysis of John Galsworthy's Play 'The Forsyte Saga'

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ABSTRACT

John Galsworthy is mainly remembered for The Forsyte Saga series. His contemporaries highly regarded him as a playwright, whose plays often dealt with social issues about class and justice. His breakthrough as a novelist came with publication of *The Island Pharisees*, which criticized the egotism of England's powerful elite. With *The Forsyte Saga*—consisting of three novels and two short stories—The first novel of this vast work appeared in 1906. *The Man of Property* was a harsh criticism of the upper middle classes, Galsworthy's own background. Galsworthy did not immediately continue it; fifteen years and with them the First World War intervened until he resumed work on the history of the Forsytes with *In Chancery* (1920) and *To Let* (1921). He went from being a radical critic of contemporary culture with satire as a primary weapon to delineating increasingly complex character portraits with greater warmth.

Keywords: Social issues, class, justice, radical critic etc.

Introduction

The term 'saga' was originally associated with traditional stories of Nordic and Viking travels, feuds, and battles. The word means 'tale' or 'history'. In a modern context 'saga' has come to be used to describe any long-running narrative giving an account of domestic, political, or romantic events. It usually comes with the implication of multiple episodes, or a story stretching over a number of family generations, complex relationships, or long-running conflicts.

Galsworthy's use of the term is slightly ironic. He did go on to write more episodes (two more trilogies) of the Forsyte family, and gave the collective name to these works *The Forsyte Chronicles*, but it is the original trilogy which has remained his most enduringly popular creation.

The story of the first trilogy covers three generations of the Forsyte family between 1886 and 1920, many of the males of which rather confusingly have the same first name – Jolyon. The family is also split into two factions who do not get on with each other. At times it is difficult to tell who is related to whom. Fortunately the various elements of the plot are held together by the two central figures around whom much of the drama revolves.

John Galsworthy's most outstanding work is *The Forsyte Saga* which was published in an omnibus volume in 1922. This Saga is divided into two trilogies. In the first trilogy is included *The Man of Property* (1906), *In Chancery* (1920) and *To Let* (1921). It was followed by a second trilogy of the Forsyte chronicles and contained three novels - *The White Monkey* (1924), *The Silver Spoon* (1926) and *Swan-Song* (1928). These last three novels were published together in one volume called *A Modern Comedy*.

It traces the fortunes of three generations of the Forsyte family, beginning in the prosperous upper middle class of Victorian London during the 1880s and ending in the early 1920s. Soames Forsyte, a successful solicitor, buys land at Robin Hill on which to build a house for his wife Irene and future family Irene falls in love with its architect, Bosinney Soames vindictively sues the latter for exceeding the estimates and Irene deserts him to live with her lover. Bosinney is run over and killed, and Irene is forced to return to her husband. The second novel, *In Chancery*, follows her love affair with Soames's cousin, Jolyon. She divorces her husband and they marry. Soames himself marries Annette Lamotte, who gives birth to a daughter, Fleur. Irene and Jolyon produce a son, Jon.

The Forsyte Saga is a sequence of five texts by John Galsworthy, first published in one volume in 1922. The saga comprises three novels, The Man of Property (1906), In Chancery (1920), and To Let (1921), and two interludes, Indian Summer of a Forsyte (1918), and Awakening (1920).

The Forsyte Saga – main characters

- Soames Forsyte a wealthy solicitor and art collector
- Irene Forsyte his beautiful and enigmatic wife who later marries Young Jolyon
- Winifred Forsyte sister to Soames, married to the degenerate fop Dartie

- Montague Dartie a dandy, gambler, wastrel, and drunkard
- Val Dartie their son, who marries his cousin Holly
- Old Jolyon oldest member of the wealthy family, a former tea merchant
- Young Jolyon his son, an underwriter and would-be artist
- Jolly (Jolyon) Forsyte his son, who dies in the Transvaal
- Jon (Jolyon) Forsyte son of Irene and her second husband Young Jolyon
- Fleur Forsyte daughter of Soames and his second wife Annette
- Prosper Profond a rich and enigmatic Belgian interloper who becomes Annette's lover
- Michael Mont the heir to a baronetcy, who eventually marries Fleur

The first book in Galsworthy's trilogy, *The Forsyte Saga*, *The Man of Property* revolves around the lives of the Forsytes, a self-conceited and cold family, who place a high value on propagating money and rising from their yeoman roots. The novel chronicles the events that lead to their inevitable demise, which is instigated by the stuffy man of property, Soames Forsyte, as he pursues the ideals of the preceding generation, whilst maintaining his own obsession with ownership. At the same time, Galsworthy candidly criticizes the values of the upper-middle classes, by means of satire, irony, a mixed array of realistic characters, an evocative setting, and an intricate plot.

Set in late 19th century London, the story begins when the extended Forsyte family come together to celebrate the engagement between June Forsyte and a bohemian architect, Philip Bosinney. Among the guests are Soames Forsyte and his beautiful wife Irene. Furthermore, Soames is represented by his adamant desire to possess property, extending even to the objectification of his wife, who he considers to be his most prized possession. Irene, on the other hand, finds herself trapped in an unhappy and loveless marriage. In a jealous attempt to distance Irene from her acquaintances and the bad influence of London, Soames appoints Bosinney to build a country house, ultimately with the aim of securing her attention for him alone. However, his covetous intentions slowly crumble in front of his very eyes, as Irene begins a furtive love affair, which threatens not only her marriage and Soames' pride, but also directly affects those close to her. Nevertheless, *The Man of Property* offers an incisive illustration of a certain time in history, as it thoroughly details the social and political mindset present in the late 19th century, including class distinction, financial attitude, and patriarchal hierarchy. In addition the novel serves to expose the destructiveness of possessive instinct, and highlight the fact that not everything in life can be bought with money.

Mr Dickens uses the term 'Chancery' to refer to the political and legal systems that are at the heart of Britain's governing processes. Chancery is located in the heart of the City of London. It includes the Courts, where lawsuits grind their way slowly through bureaucratic motions and remotions. It is where the lawsuit that affects us all, in *Bleak House*, is slowly withering the lives of those who are caught up in it. It functions in this novel as a symbol of 'stasis,' whereby no improvements in individual or general cases can be made, causing considerable grief to us all. 'In Chancery' opens in 1899 and is set against a back drop of the still new married woman's property act the Boer War and the death of Queen Victoria. The title refers to the Court of Chancery – where matters such as divorce were settled. This second novel is every bit as readable as the first, and Galsworthy's characters remain deftly explored. In this novel Galsworthy concerns himself mainly with the realities for all sides of marital disharmony, the difficulties that existed in getting a divorce and the horror of upper-middle class families over the resulting taint of scandal.

It is twelve years since Irene Forsyte left her husband Soames; she now lives alone under her maiden name of Heron on the money left to her by Old Jolyon's bequest. Soames is still bitter about the end of his marriage, having not divorced Irene at the time, he finds himself in the unsatisfactory position of being still legally married, without the necessary evidence to end it – and without the wife he still desires to possess.

With his own marital situation a constant grief to Soames, he is keen to help his sister Winifred when her husband – who had been a source of anxiety to the Forsytes for some years – steals her pearls and takes off for Buenos Aires with a dancer. Consulted as brother and lawyer Soames along with his ageing father James are eager to get Montague Dartie out of their lives – despite the scandal it will undoubtedly cause – and recommend divorce. Soames begins to rather wish he had done the same years earlier.

"How many hundred times he had walked past those trees from his father's house in Park Lane, when he was quite a young man; or from his own house in Montpellier Square in those four years of married life! And tonight, making up his mind to free himself if he could of that long useless marriage tie, he took a fancy to walk on, in at Hyde park Corner, out at Knightsbridge Gate, just as he used to when going home to Irene in the old days. What could she be like now? – How had she passed the years since he last saw her, twelve years in all, seven already since Uncle Jolyon left her that money!"

Following the events of *The Man of Property* and the brief and profoundly touching interlude *Indian Summer* of a Forsyte, siblings Soames and Winifred find themselves facing marital discord. Both Forsytes contemplate divorce, though Soames finds he is unwilling to let go of Irene, stalking her at home and abroad despite her reluctance to reconcile. When Irene inherits money from a patriarch within the Forsyte clan, Soames begins to suspect infidelities between his wife and his cousin Jolyon. But are his suspicions based on reality or the possessiveness that has haunted his marriage all along?

Meticulously detailed and deliciously suspenseful, *In Chancery* is the pivotal second installment in the acclaimed *Forsyte Saga* and one of Nobel laureate John Galsworthy's finest novels.

To Let the third book of The Forsyte Saga opens several years after we last saw the Forsyte family, it is now 1920, and Fleur, Soames' daughter and Jon, Jolyon and Irene's son are almost nineteen, and so far have never met. Since the scandal which resulted in Irene marrying her ex-husband Soames' cousin Jolyon Forsyte, the two sides of the family have not met. Fleur and Jon have so far heard no whiff of the events of twenty years earlier; their parents have shielded them from the past, each of them have existed comfortably in the world created for them by their adoring parents. When Jon and Fleur first catch sight of each other at an exhibition, he in the company of his mother, she with her father, it is instantly clear to both young people that there are things they don't know. The world of the Forsytes is shrinking, and the only one of the old Forsytes who is left is old Timothy, now past a hundred, he is cared for with diligence and affection by servants who kept the First World War from him, and take great pride in the old man's appetite.

"There are houses whose souls have passed into the limbo of Time, leaving their bodies in the limbo of London. Such was not quite the condition of 'Timothy's' on the Bayswater Road, for Timothy's soul still had one foot in Timothy Forsyte's body, and Smither kept the atmosphere unchanging, of camphor and port wine and house whose windows are only opened to air it twice a day."

Soames, who was once so keen to possess Irene at all costs, has, since his daughter's birth poured all his devotion into her. Fleur is irrepressible and spoiled she enjoys her position at the centre of her father's world. Soames' relationship with his second wife Annette is predictably cool, he has never reached a true level of understanding with her, nor does it seem that he ever tried to. Jon on the other hand, living with his devoted parents at Robin Hill, is a lovely, good natured young man, thoughtful and close to both his parents. Fleur and Jon manage to meet a number of times without anyone being aware just how close they have grown or how often they have met. When the true nature of their relationship is revealed, both sides of the family are horrified at the thought of Jon and Fleur marrying – their children the grandchildren of both Soames and Irene – a prospect Irene in particular cannot bear.

"End it forsooth! She would soon show them all that she was only just beginning. And she smiled to herself on the top of the bus which carried her back to Mayfair. But the smile died, squeezed out by spasms of anticipation and anxiety. Would she be able to manage Jon? She had taken the bit between her teeth, but could she make him take it too?"

In a short interlude after The Man of Property Galsworthy delves into the newfound friendship between Irene and Old Jolyon Forsyte (June's grandfather, now the owner of the house Soames had built). This attachment gives Old Jolyon pleasure, but exhausts his strength. 'Indian Summer of a Forsyte' turns out to be the perfect antidote to this faint chilliness of affect. For one thing, the Forsyte in question is old Jolyon himself: the entire story is about him, and from his perspective. "There was in him that which transcended Forsytism," the narrator remarks, and that quality is what the story delicately explores. It is probably most simply expressed as love of beauty, but as Jolyon feels and the story shows, it would be wrong to reduce it to an aesthetic response: it leads to love, and to sympathy, and (shades of Forster again) to a desire to connect and belong.

It's Irene who precipitates the action again in Indian Summer, this time by appearing at the country house built by her lover Bosinney for her husband Soames, and now owned by Jolyon. He's still a lonely old fellow, and now he's also pressingly aware that his time is running out, which fills him with melancholy, and a little resentment:

The thought that some day—perhaps not ten years hence, perhaps not five—all this world would be taken from him, before he had exhausted his powers of loving it, seemed to him in the nature of an injustice, brooding over his horizon.

His chance encounter with Irene brings new interest to his life: she is beautiful, she has suffered, she is kind to him, she plays Chopin. Separated from Soames (who had never, Jolyon reflects with grim satisfaction, "been able to lay hands on her again"), Irene now lives on her own, giving music lessons and helping "women who have come to grief"—"the Magdalenes of London," as Jolyon calls them. The relationship between these two forlorn souls is delicately drawn. It's unusual but not improper: Jolyon wants nothing more than to be in Irene's company, and she seems to understand and to take comfort herself in sharing what remains of the old man's time, in making this interlude more beautiful for him. These pleasures are all temporary, however, as the title reminds us: even the best of times still passes away. Alone again, Jolyon wonders if Irene was ever even there,

"or was she but the emanation of all the beauty he had loved and must leave so soon?"

The end of the story is inevitable, but that doesn't make it any less poignant. Galsworthy handles it so beautifully, too, without melodrama or overt sentimentality, simply following Jolyon as he fades out into the waning beauty around him: *"Summer—summer! So went the hum."*

The subject of the second interlude in 'Awakening' is the naïve and exuberant lifestyle of eight-year-old Jon Forsyte. He loves and is loved by all.

Conclusion

Galsworthy was a dramatist of considerable technical skill. His plays often took up specific social grievances such as the double standard of justice as applied to the upper and lower classes. 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 "for his distinguished art of narration which takes its highest form in Saga. "The three novels of The Forsyte Saga have been adapted for the cinema many times. They were turned into a twenty-six part television drama series by the BBC in 1967 which was very popular. It was broadcast all over the world, becoming the first UK television programme to be sold to the Soviet Union. This did

nothing to revive Galsworthy's critical reputation, but it helped to establish the vogue for the adaptation of literary classics as a stock-in-trade for the expanding television industry.

References

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