

Character Creation In Literature: A Critical Study of John Galsworthy's Famous Novels with Special Reference to His Leading Characters

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Abstract – This research article aims at exploring the concept of character creation in literature by Galsworthy through his renowned novels. It is a critical study of his famous novels with regard to character types and individuals. It is confined to the study of his important novels only. However, this study will be self-explanatory in terms of Galsworthy's overall perspective to English Literature in general and in particular his protagonists. This article will give the readers a rare experience of getting familiarity with Galsworthian art of character creation.

A lecture that Galsworthy gave at Oxford University in 1931, entitled "The Creation of Character in Literature", contains one of those paradoxes so common when he turns to the subject of literary criticism. He does not reply to the questions raised by his title, and concludes that the character is an unfathomable mystery:

Speaking as one who has been trying to write novels of character over a period of more than thirty years, the lecturer can make no real contribution to precision... I sink into my morning chair, a blotter on my knee, the last words or deed of some character in ink before my eyes, a pen in my hand, a pipe in my mouth, and nothing in my head. I sit, I don't intend; I don't expect; I don't even hope Gradually my mind seems to leave the chair, and be where my character is acting or speaking Suddenly, my pen jots down a movement or remark... Those pages, adding tissue to character, have been supplied from the store-cupboard of the subconscious, in response to the appeal of one's conscious directive sense. (Galsworthy, 272-273)

There is a polemical tone in these pronouncements, even more obvious when one remembers the hostile criticism against Galsworthy for producing characters who are types, not individuals. It is an old argument, to be found in the first book on Galsworthy, published in 1916 by the novelist Sheila Kaye-Smith, in which she wrote that he dealt 'with types rather than individuals'. (Kaye-Smith, 103)

Galsworthy was therefore familiar with a criticism that had never been very lenient. He counters it by speaking of his psychological novels. And the word 'type' is employed by

him in a very loose sense. When he is thinking of the precise concept of type, Galsworthy often uses the word 'idea'.

Speaking of Miltoun, Sheila Kaye-Smith touches, without knowing it, on the difficulty that has tripped up so many critics. Imprisoned in the conventional view of Galsworthy as a petty-minded sentimental conformist, they have failed to follow the path of his thinking, which is quite straightforward. Miltoun is a 'type' by birth, but a rebel by nature and temperament; circumstances are responsible for revealing his own antinomy to him. In the same way, Soames possesses the outlook and typical behavior inherited from the Forsytes, until the day when Irene reveals his true nature to him. His sensitivity is not sufficiently deadened for him to remain unaware of the cruelty of his fate.

Despite his sense of the complexity of things, Galsworthy was unable to define the situation of his leading characters: a state of semi-revolt. This irregular, confused in-between position is common among them. It contradicts the type they represent, individualizes them, leaving them in a supremely uncomfortable posture, like all false positions. It mirrors the condition Galsworthy himself knew, as someone who despite himself had remained typical of his class, while departing from it by temperament, forced into this by his seriousness and perpetual unease.

Squire Pendyce is an exception to the rule: 'a leading character who is a type', as Galsworthy admitted. (Marrot, 192)

Apart from the personal equation, another complicating variation is not pointed out by Galsworthy; not all the social circles he presents are equally constricting. The miniature world over which the Squire rules is the most rigid; that of the upper middle classes at the end of the Victorian age less so; that of the nobility still less; as for the world of intellectuals and artists at the end of the Edwardian age, in which the Dallions move, it shows signs of disintegration. Such signs are more and more frequent in the same circles fifteen years later, in the post-war period, when Galsworthy wrote *A Modern Comedy*.

It is now right time to draw a portrait of the Galsworthy hero. He is often mature in age. Several girls are given partners who are in their thirties, or approaching thirty. There are fewer younger men, and they are shy and sensitive.

Reserved, even taciturn, his hero is neither a real man of action nor a real man of thought. He has something of the amateur or the artist about him. He faces few practical problems. In most cases, his means relieve him of such considerations. Otherwise, his temperament allows him to over-ride or elude them. Jealous of his independence, he never lets himself be imposed upon. If importuned, he takes his leave. If he finds life tedious, he goes round the world. He acts little; his action is rare but impulsive, and sometimes dangerous when it does occur. He usually abstains from intervening, even if this causes him to suffer a feeling of impotence.

The Galsworthy hero is cultivated and sophisticated, rather than educated. His thinking is not very clear, and even less logical. He is fundamentally amoral – at least in

matters of love. And it is mainly love that is involved. Throughout the novels there is not a single person governed and fired by moral preoccupations, just as there is not a single real criminal.

His pride, dignity, instinctive sense of decency and restraint protect him from any baseness, as they do from asceticism and sacrifice. He embodies the privileged gentleman of the period, a free and civilized being who places his own limits on his behavior.

Several of the most attractive heroines are, as has been seen, mature women. Irene is only twenty when Soames marries her, but she is twenty-three or four when she takes Bosinney away from June, who is six years her junior, and thirty-eight when Soames entreats her to return home with him, thereby pushing her into the arms of Young Jolyon. Galsworthy continues to laud her beauty. Anna Stormer, married for twelve years, is nearly thirty-six when *The Dark Flower* begins. Oliver Cramier is twenty-six. Helen Bellow is 'thirty or thirty-two', (Galsworthy, 29) and in full possession of her charms, in *The Country House*.

There are also young women. Fleur and Jon are both nineteen when they meet. Antonia and Barbara are the same age in *The Patrician*; Sylvia and Nell in *The Dark Flower*, and Nedda in *The Freelands*, are younger. In *Fraternity*, Thyme is seventeen and Ivy nineteen. They are all endowed with charm and freshness, whether because of their shyness or, on the contrary, because of their vivaciousness. But they have less personality than their elders. Audrey, Irene and Gyp hold a pre-eminent position among the heroines. There are of course Fleur and Dinny, but they both belong to another epoch, the post-war period and each occupies a special position. It is Audrey, Irene and Gyp that best illustrate woman's pride in love.

Analyzing Galsworthy's attitude to these heroines, W L George writes: "His emotions tend to lead him to the excessive opposite of brutality.... I am always malcontented by his women All women as such wretched prey This is true, but not so completely as he makes out." (Marrot, 466). He could have added that, because of the weakness of many male characters, this is doubly unrealistic.

There is some truth in the remark. Even more clearly than Irene, Audrey is neither Victorian nor Ibsenian, because of her indifference to civil status and rights. But both of them, whether they like it or not, are in the position of Victorian women. They have almost no means of gaining independence, since they have no proper professional training. Galsworthy is optimistic in showing them on their own, and capable of making them do, by using their musical knowledge and talents. In the Edwardian age, a growing number of women were beginning to seek training and work. This tendency is not illustrated in the novels.

Yet it can be argued that he had a prophetic vision of evolution of society. The way his women throw off social protection, or even male protection, shows their remarkable self-confidence, even if it is obscurely motivated. It is a type that Galsworthy may have encountered, still rare, but which her perhaps realized would be less and less so in the future.

There is a strange yet significant contrast between the hero's situation and behaviour, and his preoccupations. Without any real reason, his worrying and 'spiritual examination' capture all his attention. One of the weaknesses and improbabilities of the novel is the failure to provide substantial enough motives for these heart-searchings. His heroes are less generous than he was himself, and far less committed to social action. Since they are so amoral in their private lives, it is hard to believe that they should be so set on defining a new social morality. Some parts of the novels become verbose. The observers and moralists that appear throughout the novels, Shelton, Young Jolyon, Gregory Vigil, Courtier, Felix Freeland, act as intermediaries, but they are also screens against reality.

The Forsytes are the only members of the middle class whose wealth comes from trade, the property market or banking. The novels as a whole show that, in society as depicted by Galsworthy, the middle classes do occupy a very important place, but not a predominant one. Alongside the six novels in the first two trilogies, there are four others devoted to the aristocracy (*The Patrician* and the *End of the Chapter* trilogy), one concerned with the landed gentry (*The Country House*), and four others in which both these social groups intermingle with the urban middle classes, professional people, intellectuals and artists (*The Island Pharisees*, *The Dark Flower*, *The Freeland*s, and *Beyond*). Finally, in five other novels, the social origin of the characters is not clear. They are always well-to-do, but may belong to one or other of the appropriate classes.

In a letter to Garnett in 1910, Galsworthy emphasized the difficulty of drawing the line of demarcation between the aristocracy and the landed gentry. (Garnett, 193-194) In most of his narratives, he illustrates the gradual interpenetration of the various sections of the middle classes and the two upper classes, a complex process of mutual influence and borrowings. Its very slowness is a guarantee of its success, and on the whole the country may gain from it. Though pessimistic when he looked at man in the family or social setting, he was quite confident in the future of the nation and the human race. Without knowing exactly in which direction they were heading, he had no doubt of their capacity to adapt.

It may be that the same society is presented in Galsworthy's plays and novels, and is equally outdated. However, the difference in viewpoint itself is important. Someone like Shelton or Young Jolyon, driven by disquiet, imagines or at least hopes for the future. This is why the novels as seen through their eyes, underline the evolutionary aspect of the situation whereas the need for dramatic effect in the plays leads Galsworthy to emphasize the grievances, oppositions, hatred, pride and toughness of the establishment, old and incapable of turning away from the past.

But not only does the viewpoint differ, but also the sense and sensibility. The plays display greater difference between rich and poor, and a different distribution of the classes. On the stage, clerks, workmen, domestic servants, the poor, victims and prostitutes appear as characters. There is almost nothing of this sort in the novels, once he had failed with the first version of *The Island Pharisees* (Ferrand even reappears eight years later, in *The Pigeon*). But, contrary to what might be expected in plays reputed to be 'social', the privileged classes, just as in the novels, form the most numerous and influential group.

However, the working classes are better represented in the plays than in the novels. The upper middle class is rather less well represented, landed gentry and aristocracy much better. The gap between the extremes is wide, the gulf apparently deeper. Two factors alter the relationship, however, both arising from the very nature of the dramatic genre. First, Galsworthy's plays give solid, material form to what is only virtual in the novels. Things that never come too much in Hilary, Shelton or Lenna, or that are neutralized by pride and caste spirit of Miltoun, are given freer rein in the drama. The most striking contrasts are between *The Eldest Son* and *The Country House* or *The Patrician*, between *The Show* and *Fraternity*. In two plays, characters take the step that Hilary drew back from in *Fraternity*.

Obviously, a very inaccurate image would be given if it were merely stated that Galsworthy's plays are more 'social' than his novels. In some ways they are less so, in others more. The impression of greater social concern is to some extent an illusion. It arises from the fact that social preoccupations predominate in the plays, though without excluding philosophical considerations. In the novels, various other types of inspiration compete with and contain one another.

It is hard to offer any judgement on the picture Galsworthy draws of the upper middle class and the nobility. His conception of both these social groups can be seen to have evolved. Edwardian as he was, the First World War caused a profound upheaval in his attitudes (as qtd. in Marrot, 803). His lessened severity towards the Forsytes as the *Chronicles* reach their end is attributable to the war and its consequences, not to any political turnabout.

His evolution was even more marked towards the nobility. There is blatant contradiction between *The Patrician* and *The Country House* on the one hand, and *End of the Chapter* on the other. Which of the two images represents Galsworthy's real opinion? No absolute answer can be given: historical perspective is needed. The lack of any substantial interval between the fictional events and their date of writing detracts from the last two trilogies. It is the novels written earlier, before 1920, that have greater historical value. The picture they present of the upper middle classes is rather different from that of Dickens and Thackeray. But the differences can be explained by the time lapse. The same class is being described, but Dickens and Thackeray showed it in its maturity, and Galsworthy later in life, when its position was comfortably established, and its former inferiority complex had given way to Pharisaic self-congratulation. It was even hobnobbing with the aristocracy, and often marrying into it.

However, even in this historical perspective, Galsworthy's attitude suffered from serious inconsistency. He ended up by restoring some of their virtues to the middle classes, in particular their solidity. On the other hand, it cannot be forgotten that he announced the decline of the Forsytes, and the third generation of the family is indeed not notable for its capacities and achievements in any area. So the image of the upper middle class is historically accurate within the limits of a certain period, approximately 1880 to 1914, although it is rather vague. However, by widening the definition of 'Forsyte' to encompass

half or even the whole of the nation, he reflects the fact that in this period the upper middle class reigned supreme.

The image of the other social classes in the novels is far less accurate, and even vaguer. There is not a single important character who is of humble condition. The lower middle class is very sparsely represented. Poor people are poor before being human, as Frank Swinnerton accurately pointed out. But they are accorded less space in his novels than Swinnerton's and St John Ervine's criticism might suggest (Swinnerton, 201). They are present less as themselves than through uneasiness about them. Strictly speaking, they are almost absent.

These remarks on the novel characters may be concluded with some words by Galsworthy himself, containing a caustic contrast between Conrad and Henry James; "Henry James drank tea, Conrad wine. Henry James lived imaginatively in a world from which elemental nature and the primitive raw material of human nature were excluded" (Galsworthy, as qtd. in Candelabra, 133).

Certain similarities between Galsworthian and Jamesian characters (both have time to think about themselves) make the verdict on James' tea-drinking somewhat rash. But enough attention has been given to Galsworthy's analysis of instincts, passions, emotions, to show that, like Conrad, he was a wine drinker – though he did not have a very varied cellar.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the method in which Galsworthy used to create characters has been given proper accord. His novels depict certain qualities based on his ability to delineate character types and individual in a better way than what is expected. For example, Soames Forsyte in *The Man of Property* is shown as a negative character whose addiction towards property and treating his wife as a commodity has been transformed into a character whose sole aim is to make his daughter, Fleur happy in the third novel of *The Forsyte Saga*, *To Let*. Irene Forsyte on the other hand has been given proper recognition when she firmly believes that she no longer will be able to adjust with her husband as he becomes very cruel to her. The success of the novelist as a creator of characters has come in a gradual way to Galsworthy and it has been consistent too. His magnum opus, *The Forsyte Saga* gives a chance to the readers to understand his creative power especially handling the protagonist, Soames Forsyte from *The Man of Property* (first novel of the trilogy) to be a man so engrossed into property instinct to a man who has been converted into a reasonable only to make his daughter, Fleur happy in the novel, *To Let* (last novel of the trilogy).

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