

Nobel Prize in Literature 1932



John Galsworthy

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1932 was awarded to John Galsworthy "for his distinguished art of narration which takes its highest form in *The Forsyte Saga*".

When we survey John Galsworthy's authorship, it seems to develop unusually smoothly, pushed on by a conscientious and indefatigable creative impulse. Yet he is not one of those who have turned to the literary career rapidly and without resistance. Born, as the English put it, with a silver spoon in his mouth, that is, economically independent, he studied at Harrow and Oxford, chose the law without practising it, and travelled all over the world. When, at the age of twenty-eight, he began writing for the first time, the immediate reason was the exhortation of a woman friend, and it was to Galsworthy a mere recreation, evidently not without the inherent prejudices of the gentleman, against the vocation of writing. His first two collections of tales were published under the pen name of John Sinjohn, and the editions were soon withdrawn by the self-critical beginner. Not until he was thirty-seven did he begin his real authorship by publishing the novel *The Island Pharisees* (1904), and two years later appeared *The Man of Property*, the origin of his fame and at the same time of his monumental chief work, *The Forsyte Saga*.

In Galsworthy's satire against the Island Pharisees, the fundamental feature that was to mark all his subsequent works was already apparent. The book deals with an English gentleman's having stayed abroad long enough to forget his conventional sphere of thoughts and feelings; he criticizes the national surroundings severely, and in doing so he is assisted by a Belgian vagabond, who casually makes his acquaintance in an English railway compartment and who becomes his fate. At that time Galsworthy was himself a cosmopolite returned home, prepared to fight against the old capitalistic aristocratic society with about the same program as [Bernard Shaw](#), although the Englishman, contrary to the Irishman who fought with intellectual arms, above all aimed at capturing feeling and imagination. The pharisaical egoism of England's ruling classes, the subject of Galsworthy's debut, remained his program for the future, only specialized in his particular works. He never tired of fighting against all that seemed narrow and harsh in the national character, and the persistence of his attacks on social evil indicates his strong impressions and deeply wounded feeling of justice.

With the Forsyte type he now aimed at the upper middle class, the rich businessmen, a group not yet having reached real gentility, but striving with its sympathies and instincts toward the well-known ideal of the gentleman of rigid, imperturbable, and imposing correctness. These people are particularly on their guard against dangerous feelings, a fact which, however, does not exclude accidental lapses, when passion intrudes upon their life, and liberty claims its rights in a world of property instincts. Beauty, here represented by Irene, does not like to live with *The Man of Property*; in his bitter indignation at this, Soames Forsyte becomes almost a tragic figure. It seems uncertain if in the beginning Galsworthy thought of a sequel to that first Forsyte novel, which is a masterpiece of an energetic, firm, and independent account of human nature. At any rate it was not until fifteen years later that he again took up his Forsytes, and at this time the effects of the World War had radically changed the perspective. But now this work expanded; *In Chancery* (1920) and *To Let* (1921) and two short story interludes were added, and thus *The Forsyte Saga* proper was completed. Not finished with the younger

members of the family, Galsworthy wrote *A Modern Comedy*, a new trilogy whose structure is exactly like that of its predecessor and consists of the three novels, *The White Monkey* (1924), *The Silver Spoon* (1926), and *Swan Song* (1928), united by two short story interludes. These two trilogies together form an unusual literary accomplishment. The novelist has carried the history of his time through three generations, and his success in mastering so excellently his enormously difficult material, both in its scope and in its depth, remains an extremely memorable feat in English literature - doubly remarkable, if we consider that it was performed in a field in which the European continent had already produced some of its best works.

In the foreground of this chronicle is everyday reality, as experienced by the Forsytes, all personal fortunes, conflicts, and tragicomedies. But in the background is visible the dark fabric of historical events. Every reader is sure to remember the chapter describing how Soames with his second wife witnesses the funeral of Queen Victoria in grey weather at the Hyde Park fence, and the rapid survey of the age from her accession to the throne: «Morals had changed, manners had changed, men had become monkeys twice removed, God had become Mammon - Mammon so respectable as to deceive himself.» In the Forsyte novels we observe the transformation and the dissolution of the Victorian age up to our days. In the first trilogy comes to life the period that in England effected the fusion of nobility and plutocracy with the accompanying change of the notion of a «gentleman», a kind of Indian summer of wealth before the days of the storm. The second trilogy, no longer called «saga» but «comedy», describes the profound crisis of the new England whose task is to change the ruins of the past and the improvised barracks of wartime into its future home. The gallery of types is admirably complete. Robust businessmen, spoiled society ladies, aunts touching in an old-fashioned way, rebellious young girls, gentlemen of the clubs, politicians, artists, children, and even dogs - these last-mentioned especially favoured by Galsworthy - emerge in the London panorama in a concrete form, alive before our eyes and ears.

The situations recur as a curious documentation of the oscillation and the undulation in a family of given hereditary dispositions. The individual portraits are distinguished, and the law of social life is at work.

It is also instructive, however, to observe in these novels how Galsworthy's view gradually changes. The radical critic of culture rises by degrees to a greater objectivity in his appreciation and to a more liberal view of the purely human. An often cited example of this is his treatment of Soames, this standard national type, at first satirized, but then described with a respect that, reluctantly growing, finally changes into a genuine sympathy. Galsworthy has seized upon this sympathy; his characterization of Soames's personality thoroughly worked out becomes the most memorable feature of the Forsyte saga and the comedy of the descendants. One easily remembers one of those masterly final episodes of *Swan Song*, in which Old Soames, having driven to his ancestors' village on the west coast, finds with the help of an old census map the place where the Forsytes' farm had been situated, where only a single stone marks the site. Something like the ghost of a path leads him down into a valley of grass and furze. He breathes in the fresh, rough sea air which goes a little to his head; he puts on his overcoat and sits musing, his back against the stone. Had his ancestors built the house themselves at this lonely place, had they been the first to settle down here? he wonders. Their England rises before him, an England «of pack horses and very little smoke, of peat and wood fires, and wives who never left you, because they couldn't probably». He sits there a long time, absorbed in his feeling for the birthplace.

And something moved in him, as if the salty independence of that lonely spot were still in his bones. Old Jolyon and his own father and the rest of his uncles - no wonder they'd been independent, with this air and loneliness in their blood; and crabbed with the pickling of it - unable to give up, to let go, to die. For a moment he seemed to understand even himself.»

To Galsworthy Soames thus becomes one of the last representatives of static old England. There was no humbug in him, we are told; he had his trying ways, but he was genuine. The sober prosaic respectability is in this manner duly honoured in Galsworthy's

realism, and this has been pointed out as the essential factor in his judgment of human nature. As time passed, and the weary, cynical laxity grew more and more visibly modern, the chronicler found that several traits which under other circumstances had been little appreciated, perhaps really constituted the secret of the British power of resistance. On the whole, Galsworthy's later novels are permeated with a patriotic feeling of self-defence that appears also in his descriptions of the home and studies of nature. Even these last-mentioned are rendered with a more tender and more anxious poetry, with the feeling of protecting something precious yet already shadowed by certain loss. It may be old chambers where people have established themselves as if to remain there forever. Or it may be an English garden park, where the September sun is shining beautifully on bronze-coloured beech leaves and centenary hedges of yew.

Time does not permit me to dwell in the same detail upon other of Galsworthy's works, often quite comparable in quality to the Forsyte series, which surpasses them by virtue of its epic dimensions. It is above all in *The Country House* (1907), in *Fraternity* (1901), and in *The Dark Flower* (1913) that his mature essential character is to be sought. In the novel of the manor he created perhaps his most exquisite female portrait, Mrs. Pendency, the type of the perfect, unaffected lady with all the modest tragedy which surrounds a truly noble nature, condemned to be restrained if not destroyed by the fetters of tradition. In *Fraternity* he represented, with a discreet mixture of pity and irony, the unfulfilled martyr of social conscience, the aesthete who is tortured by the shadows of the proletarian masses in London, but is not able to take the decisive step and carry out his altruistic impulse of action. There we also meet the old original Mr. Stone, the utopian dreamer with his eternal monologues beneath the night sky, indeed one of Galsworthy's most memorable types. Nor do we forget *The Dark Flower*, which may be called a psychological sonata, played with a masterly hand and based on the variations of passion and resignation in the ages of man. Even in the form of the short story Galsworthy has often been able to evoke an emotional response through contrasts of shadow and light which work rather graphically. He can do this in only a few pages which become animated by his

personal style, for example, when he tells about such a simple case as that of the German shoemaker in «Quality», the story of the hopeless struggle of good craftsmanship against low-price industry.

By appealing to education and the sense of justice, his narrative art has always gently influenced contemporary notions of life and habits of thought. The same is true of his dramatic works, which were often direct contributions to social discussion and led to definite reforms at least in one area, the administration of public prisons in England. His dramas show an unusual richness of ideas combined with great ingenuity and technical skill in the working out of scenic effect. When certain inclinations are found, they are always just and humane. In *The Forest* (1924), for example, he brands the inconsiderate spirit of greed that, for crass purposes, exploits the heroism of the British world-conquering mind. *The Show* (1925) represents the defencelessness of the individual against the press in a family tragedy where brutal newspaper curiosity functions like a deaf and unchecked machine, removing the possibility of any one being held responsible for the resultant evil.

Loyalties depicts a matter of honour in which loyalty is tested and impartially examined in the different circles where it is at work, that is, the family, the corporation, the profession, and the nation. The force of these and other plays is in their logical structure and their concentrated action; sometimes they also possess an atmosphere of poetic feeling that is far from trivial. I am thinking especially of *A Pigeon* (1912) and *A Bit o' Love* (1915) which, however, did not meet with such brilliant success on the stage. Although on the whole Galsworthy's plays cannot be rated artistically with his novels, they confirm quite as plainly how strongly he sticks to his early ideal of liberty, that which in Shelley put on the wings and flames of dawn. Even in his rather cool dramatic works we meet a steady enemy of all oppression, spiritual as well as material, a sensitive man who with all his heart reacts against lack of consideration and never gives way in his demand for fair play.

In technique Turgenev is one of his first teachers. As in the charming Russian narrator, we find in Galsworthy a definite musical charm catching and keeping the hidden

feelings. His intuition is so infallible that he can content himself with a slight allusion and a broken hint. But then there is Galsworthy's irony, such a singular instrument that even the tone separates him from any other writer. There are many different kinds of irony. One principal kind is negative and can be compared to the hoar-frost of the windows in a house where there is no fire, where the hearth has grown cold long ago. But there is also an irony friendly to life, springing from warmth, interest, and humanity; such is Galsworthy's. His is an irony that, in the presence of tragicomic evil, seems to question why it must be so, why it is necessary, and whether there is nothing to remedy it. Sometimes Galsworthy makes nature herself take part in that ironic play about human beings, to underline the bitterness or sweetness of the incidents with the help of winds, clouds, fragrances, and bird cries. Assisted by this irony he successfully appeals to the psychological imagination, always the best ally of understanding and sympathy.

Galsworthy once formulated his artistic motto in words such as harmony, proportion, balance. They mark his natural turn of mind, a spiritual ideal, now often suspect, perhaps because it is so difficult to reach. We soon discover that this poet who so severely and persistently attacked the typical gentleman of self-sufficiency, himself indisputably succeeded in filling the old notion with new life, so that it preserved its contact with both the immediately human and the unrestricted aesthetic instinct. In the artist Galsworthy flourish exactly those qualities of temper that in English are comprehended in this word: *gentleness*. These qualities are expressed in his works, and in this way they have become a cultural contribution to our own times.

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