

John Galsworthy's *Swan song*: A critical study

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Abstract

This research article aims at exploring the greatness of the novel, *Swan Song*, the last novel of the second trilogy, *A Modern Comedy* written by Galsworthy. A close study of this novel, *Swan Song* reveals the versatility of the author who is known for his Novels, Plays, Short Stories, Essays and Poems. Besides, the way he delineates the characters (throughout the Saga, *The Forsyte Saga* (the first trilogy) and *A Modern Comedy* (the second trilogy) especially Soames Forsyte and Fleur needs special attention. In fact, the techniques used by the author in the present novel will really make the readers put him on a pedestal. This paper is divided into three segments namely introduction, critical study of the novel, *Swan Song* and the conclusion which gathers the argument present in the previous segments. The introduction deals with the author and his growth and development as a writer of different genres, the second segment which is the core part of this article discusses the novel, *Swan Song* in terms of narrative, characterization and other important techniques used by the author and the final segment which is the conclusion of the article. The author (No.1) is inspired to take up *Swan Song* for publication as he has done his Ph.D. on John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* with New Historicist Approach.

Keywords: SS-swan song, TFS – the forsyte saga mutatis, mutandis – due alteration, trilogy-three novels, saga–life of a great family

Introduction

According to A.C Ward, Galsworthy “was moved throughout his life by an acute sense of social justice, and though he aimed to hold the balance fairly between rich and poor, between the powerful and the helpless, his emotions were always engaged on the side of the underdog”. (as qtd. in Sternlicht 128)

John Galsworthy was born on 14th August, 1867 at Kingston Hill, Surrey to Blanche Bartleet and John Galsworthy. His father belonged to the upper middle class family, a solicitor, Company director and Property owner. John Galsworthy was given good education by his parents. When he was nine years old, he was sent to Saugeen preparatory school at Bournemouth. During summer term of 1881 Galsworthy left Saugeen for Harrow. His stint at Harrow gave him both confidence and challenge. He believed in Harrow's significant role it made on its students. He said, “At Eton and Harrow one is licked into shape for the big things: diplomacy, politics, the service” (qtd. in Dupre 23). Later he entered New College, Oxford in the Michaelmas terms of 1881 to study Law. He learnt the art of wearing neat dress at Oxford that he followed till he died.

According to H A L Fisher, the historian and a contemporary of Galsworthy at New College, “John Galsworthy being ‘tall and slim, well-built, strikingly handsome; and always, I should say, the best man in College...’” (qtd. in Marrot 66)

After a three-year stay at Oxford he received his degree in Law in 1889. Later in the year 1890 as per his father's wish, he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn and called to the Bar in the Easter Term. He never showed any interest in learning the nuances of law though he showed a little professionalism. His dislike for the profession is indeed made clear by him in the following words: “I read in various chambers, practised almost not at all, and disliked my profession thoroughly” (qtd. in Dupre 36).

In 1891 Galsworthy went to Canada for a hunting trip and there met Ada Pearson Cooper Galsworthy, his cousin, Arthur's

bride. His travel continued in the year 1892 too when he went to Australia, the South Seas, and New Zealand. This 1892 trip was very important for Galsworthy as he was firm in learning Navigation and Maritime law. The following year proved to be a turning point in his life when he met Joseph Conrad in the ship, *Torrens* in Adelaide Harbour in Australia. It was Joseph Conrad who inspired and encouraged him to turn to writing. Their voyage lasted for fifty-six days. According to Galsworthy, the meeting with Conrad was very crucial and important. He recorded his meeting Conrad in the following words:

It was in March 1893 that I first met Conrad on board the English sailing ship *Torrens* in Adelaide Harbour. He was superintending the stowage of cargo. Very dark he looked in the burning sunlight, tanned, with a peaked brown beard, almost black hair, and dark brown eyes, over which the lids were deeply folded. He was thin, not tall, his arms very long, his shoulders broad, his head set rather forward. He spoke to me with a strange foreign accent. He seemed to me strange on an English ship. For fifty-six days I sailed in his company. Many evening watches in fine weather we spent on the poop. Ever the great teller of tales, he had already nearly twenty years of tales to tell. On that ship he talked of life, not literature. At Cape Town on my last evening he asked me to his cabin and I remember feeling that outweighed for me all the other experiences of that voyage. Fascination was Conrad's great characteristic – the fascination of deep expressiveness and zest, of his deeply affectionate heart and his far-ranging subtle mind. He was extraordinarily perceptive and receptive. (Dupre 47)

Soon after the trip to Australia, he was asked to go to Russia by his father to inspect a mine. But these trips never made

Galsworthy learn anything as he was not interested. His father was disappointed as his son did not fulfill his desire to become a good lawyer.

It was the year 1895 when Galsworthy developed a kind of friendship with Ada, his cousin's wife. He met her in Gare du Nord in Paris. Ada spoke to him and asked him to turn to writing. She encouraged him with the following words: "Why don't you write? You are just the person" (Marrot 101). It was Ada who with two short sentences had placed herself in Galsworthy's life forever. She became his amanuensis, the inspiration for all his works. In 1902 Ada left her husband and by 1905 got her divorce from her husband and married John Galsworthy. Her companionship made Galsworthy to concentrate on writing and that lasted till his death on 31st January, 1933.

Critical study of the novel, *Swan Song*

Galsworthy uses the General Strike as a way of bringing together his scattered characters. As in *The Forsyte Saga*, the Forsytes gather instinctively, to face the crisis. The novel, *Swan Song* provides an answer to the question raised in *The White Monkey*, the first novel of the trilogy, *A Modern Comedy*. Under difficult circumstances, the essential virtues of the English shine out: the nation is not so decadent as might have been feared.

There is a certain complacency in Galsworthy's description of the reassuring sight offered to an observer by the English capital, countryside and character. But the author soon loses interest in the current industrial situation, and it becomes clear that the Forsytes, all the surviving Forsytes, are the main subject, not the general strike. Winifred's house is where they now meet, instead of Timothy's in *The Forsyte Saga*, the first trilogy). This is the new 'Forsyte 'Change'. The novel is the occasion of a farewell meeting, a final look back at the past.

Even more than a response to *The White Monkey* the first novel of the second trilogy), *Swan Song* is a continuation of *The Forsyte Saga*, and could be regarded as part of it. There is a two-fold link, both temporal and fundamental: with *To Let* the last novel of the first trilogy, *The Forsyte Saga*), on the one hand, and with *The Man of Property* the first novel of the first trilogy, *The Forsyte Saga*) on the other. Fleur's love-affair with Jon the son of Young Jolyon - Irene) so harshly interrupted by Young Jolyon in *To Let*) before his death, begins again, seven years later in *Swan Song*). She reawakens their memories, and at the same time tries once again to force the hand of destiny. But her tragic passion also fits into a larger picture, for it reaches its climax forty-six years after the conflict between her father (Soames Forsyte) and Irene (Soames' first wife) and, mutatis mutandis, repeats the conflict. She violates Jon, fired with the same possessiveness that had driven Soames to carry out the rape of his wife (Irene). Such passionate love also has disastrous consequences. In the very act of winning she Fleur) loses, in the same surroundings where she and Jon, but also Irene and Bosinney the lover of Irene) before them, had loved each other, in the enchanting setting of Robin Hill the country house owned by Soames Forsytes), where Soames had had the misfortune to have his house built.

All the pathos and poetry arising from the earlier stories are "flawlessly recreated, blended and sublimated when, in a strange vision, Irene's face and Fleur's come to form a single image in the mind of Soames" (TFS 1053). The Saga, so to speak, has come full circle. Fleur's unhappiness spills over on

to the past which lies at its source and, by demonstrating its consequences, makes it all even sadder. June's (the daughter of Young Jolyon through his first wife in *The Forsyte Saga*) revelations to Michael Mont (husband of Fleur) bring back the action of *The Man of Property* (the first novel of *The Forsyte Saga* (the first trilogy)), giving a new and immediate dramatic value to those old events. Despite himself, Soames is drawn into this new sequence of role. Through love for his daughter, he remains silent, and allows himself to be destroyed by the distant consequences of his initial act. As in the finale of a great musical work, all the most beautiful and stirring effects are repeated and amplified, giving the long denouement of *Swan Song* tremendous majesty and fullness.

The pages in the novel, *Swan Song* contain some of the best of Galsworthy's writing. However, this novel, which was long regarded in France as giving a faithful picture of England, cannot be considered a perfect specimen of his art, despite what he himself said. The narrative is too slow and too fragmented, in the first two parts of the novel.

Galsworthy is capable of showing contrastive aspects of life with regard to his characters immaculate recording of events. He has also been successful in portraying such type of characters through his novels. The characters, Soames and Fleur are best examples of this category. To quote Sternlicht:

Swan Song is qualitatively second only to *The Man of Property* in the chronicles, in part because it is a photo negative of the first novel, published twenty-two years previously: the villain Soames Forsyte) has become the hero, love for a lost wife is replaced by love for a saved daughter Fleur), and adultery is deplored instead of romanticized. As with *The Man of Property*, characterization is very sharp, the plot singular and always interesting, and the description of the English countryside once more bespeaking the author's great love for the land of his ancestors. (72)

To prove further, the characteristic traits of Fleur need to be discussed. Her longing for Jon to possess him like his father's possessive instinct is evident in her attitude too. She is a true descendent of James Forsyte (Soames' father). When she desires to collect and to have, nothing can stop her, and she is determined to have Jon as her lover, despite, and because of, his attempts to reject her obvious advances. Finally, her opportunity arrives. She has offered Jon a ride, and she stops near fateful Robin Hill again. With consummate irony Galsworthy has Fleur seduce, nearly rape, Jon with the same possessive intensity that her father raped Jon's mother in *The Man of Property*).

In the words of Galsworthy, it is worthy to understand the possessive instinct of Fleur:

Jon reached his hand up. She turned her lips and touched it.

"Jon – kiss me just one."

"You know I couldn't kiss you 'just once, 'Fleur."

"Then kiss me forever, Jon."

"No, no! No, no!"

"Things happen as they must – you said so."

"Fleur – don't! I can't stand it."

She laughed – very slow, softly.

“I don’t want you to. I’ve waited seven years for this. No! Don’t cover your face! Look at me! I take it all on myself. The woman tempted you. But, Jon, you were always mine. There! That’s better. I can see your eyes. Poor Jon! Now, kiss me!” In that long kiss her very spirit seemed to leave her; she could not even see whether his eyes were open, or like hers, closed. And again the owl hooted.

Jon tore his lips away. He stood there in her arms, trembling like a startled horse.

With her lips against his ear, she whispered:

“There’s nothing, Jon; there’s nothing.” She could hear him holding-in his breath, and her warm lips whispered on: “Take me in your arms, Jon; take me!” The light had failed completely now; stars were out between the dark feathering of the trees, and low down, from where the coppice sloped up towards the east, a creeping brightness seemed trembling towards them through the wood from the moon rising. A faint rustle broke the silence, ceased, broke it again. Closer, closer – Fleur pressed against him.

“Not here, Fleur; not here. I can’t – I won’t –
“Yes, Jon; here – now! I claim you.” (As qtd. in Sternlicht 70)

Galsworthy discreetly plants a row of asterisks to curtain off part of this unusual (obscene) scene, but there is no doubt as to who did the violating. Alas for Fleur, as it happened to Soames with Irene, in the very act of winning she loses forever what she wanted most, for Jon will never be her lover again.

Conclusion

To sum up, Galsworthy continued as a chronicler in *Swan Song*, the last novel of the second trilogy, *A Modern Comedy* by using as his focusing event the great General Strike of 1926, a national crisis in which nearly all of Great Britain participated either on the side of the strikers or in support of the government by volunteering labour to carry on the essential services of the country. The strike was a test of national character, as Galsworthy well knew, and the British proved themselves able to endure and survive with a minimum of violence what could have developed into a revolution, although the chasm between the working class and the other classes deepened so much that effects of the strike remain to this day. Furthermore, Michael Mont sums up the author’s view of life only five years before his death: “It’s pretty hard sometimes to remember that it’s all comedy; but one gets there, you know” (SS 796).

As we see in the preface to *A Modern Comedy*, Galsworthy adds, “There is still truth in the old proverb: ‘That which a man most loves shall in the end destroy him’ (AMC 10). For Soames it was the possession of beauty and love, not only for the women of his heart, but also for his child, Fleur. Still, finally, a long life ending, even if it has not been an entirely fulfilled one, is not a tragedy; it is only, like any comedy, an intriguing story. In comedy or tragedy, the hero’s character is often the shaper of his destiny. Soames’s contradictions – his nearly religious belief in the sanctity of property and his gentlemanly behaviour in all situations except his first marriage; his philistine lust for collecting and his true appreciation for fine art; his competitive Forsyte instinct and his sense of honour and duty – provide the major themes, the central architectonic, and the essence of character development in “*The Forsyte Chronicles*,” and are a

major reason Soames Forsyte has a niche in the pantheon of the great, living characters of English fiction. On the publication of *Swan Song* in 1928, London newspapers announced the death of Soames Forsyte with other front page news.

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