

CHAPTER-IV

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John Galsworthy's literary career shows that he wrote novels, full-length plays, one-act plays, short stories, essays and letters. But his career does not indicate any period when one particular literary genre predominated, even temporarily. His famous novel, The Man of Property was published in 1906. One wonders why Galsworthy did not immediately set out on a sequel, which he did in 1922. Instead, he wrote The Silver Box, a play, in the same year. The Little Dream, his first one-act play, was presented in 1911. It seems that Galsworthy moved from one form to another, apparently at will and without any predetermined plan. His literary career shows that he had been already thinking of the theatre, even before he achieved anything decisive in the field of the novel. Galsworthy's one-act plays, thus, are the expressions of his typical mood. But being fully aware of the potentiality of this genre, Galsworthy made significant experiments in technique and form, even though his one-act plays appear to be the products of his unusual and unexpected creative moments.

However, there is a close relation between Galsworthy's one-act plays and his novels and plays, as far as the theme is concerned. Galsworthy had dealt with the men of property in his

Forsythe tales. As a dramatist he concentrated more sharply on certain aspects of their wealth and its making. According to A.S. Collins, in the plays, "Galsworthy explored various ways in which society, through its laws and institutions, its conventions, its distinctions of wealth and power over against poverty and dependence, in fact by its very nature of being a society, was always a power to support some and oppose others, shaped and determined the destinies of individuals...."⁴⁰

Ofcourse, his one-act plays, do not deal with specific problems of society in the typical Galsworthy mood. They throw light on the effects of a specific problem in a person's life, they satirize the national characteristics in general and human nature in particular; they ridicule social conventions, sometimes they deal with an altogether different theme of condemnation of cheap arts. According to A.D. Choudhuri, Galsworthy has tried "to interpret the complexities of the modern industrial era, the intense conflicts and contrasts of bourgeois society,"⁴¹ in his one-act plays. The one-act play is capable of being poetic as well as profound or subtle. Hence it is useful to project several present-day conflicts, Galsworthy chose this genre, even though he wrote novels and plays. From the beginning Galsworthy's one-act plays like The First and the Last, Punch and Go, Hall Marked show a tremendous potentiality in exploring certain themes. For instance, he wrote directly about the War only in his one-act plays like Defeat and The Sun. His main works, novels and plays,

few did not deal with this subject specifically. The German girl in Defeat, expresses Galsworthy's views on war.

There is one more instance which shows Galsworthy's awareness of the limitations as well as the strength of this genre. He never converted a story into a one-act play or a one-act play into a story. His story "The First and the Last" and one-act play with the same title, have the same subject. But Galsworthy has given a different treatment to the same subject in his one-act play.

Galsworthy's dramatic world is mainly grey. Majority of his one-act plays have a serious tone. Only The Little Man is predominantly humorous. Here Galsworthy exploits a somewhat farcical way to communicate his message. Except The Little Man no other one-act play is humorously conceived. There is a bit of Irish tinge in The Little Man. The remaining one-act plays reveal a typical and serious English tone. The comic tone is further found in the one-act plays of J.M. Barrie and Bernard Shaw. The wit of Shaw maintained a comic tone in his plays as well as one-act plays. Galsworthy insisted on sympathy and compassion. Virginia Woolf describes John Galsworthy (and Arnold Bennett) as "materialist". It is true that his one-act plays, except The Little Dream, consistently maintain the realistic and not the romantic attitude to life. But just as The Little Man reveals a bit of Irish tinge in Galsworthy's

one-act plays, The Little Dream (1911) shows his experiment with the fantastic and the poetic. It is almost a poem presented on the stage and here Galsworthy's rich imagination replaces the social problems of his days. A Bit of Love (1915) is the only other play in which we find this poetic touch. His contemporaries, Granville Barker and Laurence Houseman, also jointly wrote a poetic one-act play, Prunella or Love in a Dutch Garden. Galsworthy was aware that for some situations a verse one-act play is more suitable. The idea of a verse one-act play was developed later on by Christopher, Fry and T.S. Eliot in their plays. Eliot's adoption of the choric speech in Murder in the Cathedral presents a fine culmination of the poetic touch. Galsworthy realized this potentiality of the one-act play and utilized it to the maximum in The Little Dream and this is his contribution to the genre.

This leads to one more possibility hidden in his shorter plays and of which, Galsworthy perhaps had little idea. His one-act plays may be presented as radio plays or even television plays. Hermon Ould has pointed out that even the radio music left him cold. He thought deeply before giving consent to broadcast his play Strife. Later on, he was asked to write a play for broadcasting and he refused.⁴² Some of the one-act plays of Galsworthy were not successful on the stage. But a one-act play like The Little Man, though difficult for presentation on the stage, may be quite successful on radio

or television. Another one-act play, The First and the Last, with its cinematic technique, may be a great success on television. After the Fifties, there has been a considerable development of the one-act play because of the radio and television. The writers like Giles and Harold Pinter have gained their most significant achievements in the field of radio and television respectively. Besides, Clive Exton and David Mercer, modern one-act play writers, are known for writing for television only.⁴³ This seems to be a great shift since the demise of the curtain-raiser. Galsworthy's one-act plays do possess a great potentiality for presentation on radio as well as television.

✓ The one-act play can effectively satirize human temperament and conduct. That way, the strain of satire, has been dominant in the literature of the present century. But Galsworthy's one-act plays show that the satire becomes sharper and concentrated in the one-act play. His one-act plays, The Little Man, Punch and Go and Hall Marked, contain the element of satire. It is remarkable that normally Galsworthy's one-act plays have a small number of characters. But in his satirical one-act plays we find a comparatively large number of characters. Along with satire, irony is a regular weapon of Galsworthy. Defeat presents an ironical situation of the German girl's misery. In The Sun, the newspaper boy is used to reveal the ironical situation in the life of a soldier.

Regarding Galsworthy's technique of characterization, it is seen that he deals chiefly with the average persons. He does not paint exceptional figures. His characters, drawn from the common life, get evolved from the impact of the situations. They are presented with a minimum of deft strokes. R.H. Coats writes, "He doesn't tell us more of his characters than we need to know for the purpose of following the play."⁴⁴ They are, to a great extent, a large number of unnamed, insignificant characters and dumb upper-middle class people. It is to be noted that many of Galsworthy's one-act plays have abstract titles. Galsworthy does not give names even to the characters in his one-act plays ^{like} The Little Man, Hall Marked, The Sun and Defeat. Similarly, in his plays like Escape he has used the same device. This method expands the scope of the theme and deepens its intensity. That is why, Galsworthy's characters appear to be types rather than individuals. D.H. Lawrence writes in his essay "John Galsworthy", "I haven't been able to discover the real individual - nothing but social individuals."⁴⁵ The motives of Galsworthy's characters are not very complex, which is in keeping with the form of one-act play. The number of characters, except for his satirical one-act plays, is limited. In The Little Man, Galsworthy successfully presents a meeting of heterogeneous company on the stage. There is no villain in any of his one-act plays. Shaw's characters are mostly intellectual and they move as his mouthpieces. Galsworthy's characters are governed by their emotions and they appear to be subdued rather than talkative.

Galsworthy's characterization is strengthened by his effective use of the dumb show, which is a remarkable aspect of his style. Many of his striking scenes are presented as wordless episodes. The slow and wordless actions of the German girl in Defeat achieve more than any discussion on War could do. But in the satirical one-act play like Hall Marked Galsworthy presents rapid but wordless situations, in which the gestures speak for words. This pantomimic technique was employed in the old silent films. Allardyce Nicoll accounts for Galsworthy's technique by pointing out that Galsworthy had, "a problem of finding means for the expression of emotions. Galsworthy's solution was to replace the dialogue by wordless episodes. He tried to evoke the desired emotions imaginatively."⁴⁶ Therefore, Galsworthy frequently closed his one-act plays, like The First and the Last, on some stage directions. He does not attempt any over-elaboration as Shaw does in his detailed stage directions. Galsworthy's stage directions become a part of the single episode in his one-act play. Galsworthy's dialogues are brief, and they show his keen sense of situation. Even the dialogues of the girl in Defeat, spoken in German, are easy to comprehend. Galsworthy's idea regarding the dialogues is found in his own words. He writes, "from start to finish good dialogue is hand-made, like good lace; clear, of fine texture."⁴⁷

Harmony, proportion and balance, which are the features of John Galsworthy's style in his literary works, are visible even in his one-act plays. A good craftsman as he was, Galsworthy



paid much attention to economy, restraint and concentration, in his one-act plays. He was highly praised for "logical structure and concentrated action."⁴⁸ His one-act plays like Defeat, reveal his keen sense of situation. A trifle but funny incident is exploited for Hall Marked. The First and the Last is simply an unsurpassed thriller, in which Galsworthy's naturalistic technique creates an illusion of actual life on the stage. It makes the spectators participate in the events in the plot. Galsworthy has written, "A good plot is not sure edifice which slowly rises out of the interplay of circumstance or temperament."⁴⁹ It is seen that his plots in the one-act plays are the unfolding of a situation, with its effect on the characters and the corresponding reactions the other way. Galsworthy has made some successful experiments in the plot construction of his one-act plays. He has taken much liberty with time in The First and the Last. He has incorporated three scenes in The Little Man and six scenes in The Little Dream. Incidentally, both these one-act plays have Austrian setting. In Punch and Go, he has properly handled the rehearsal scene and the dream scene. The end of that one-act play reveals how Galsworthy has skillfully woven the two different scenes.

Some aspects of Galsworthy's one-act play have invited criticism. D.H. Lawrence remarks, "The story is feeble, the characters have no blood and bones, the emotions are faked...."⁵⁰ Similarly the subdued endings of his plays as well as of his

one-act plays have been condemned. His impartiality leads sometimes to irresolution. It was remarked, his curtain hesitated to fall. This is because Galsworthy presents problems, not their solutions. This inconclusiveness makes him a different writer than Shaw. Besides, Galsworthy does not possess a picturesque imagination like Shaw's. In the language as well as in the plot, Shaw prefers the brilliant to the homely, the unorthodox to the common. But one has to remember that John Galsworthy was not merely a writer of the one-act play or drama. That is why, as compared with the one-act plays of Chekhov, Lady Gregory or Synge, his efforts seem to be tentative. He was not primarily a missionary dramatist like Bernard Shaw.

But in the words of R.H. Coats, "He has indeed a message to deliver, but he takes care that it shall be artistically embodied."⁵¹ Like his full-length plays, the one-act plays reveal his image as the steady enemy of oppressions. He shows that many of our troubles arise merely from self-centred egoism and intolerance. Wayne Philip rightly points out, "Galsworthy's plays, rather than his novels, are biased in favour of the under-dogs."⁵² His seven one-act plays, outwardly appearing to be heterogeneous, are linked together with his indirect advocacy of understanding and sympathy. In the editorial note of The London Mercury, John Galsworthy was described "a promoter of understanding between nations, and in particular, between the

intellectuals of all nations."⁵³ Galsworthy's message has been properly summarized in his address to the students of the Columbia University, "to have a higher and wider conception of the dignity of human life..... to do our jobs..... to be brotherly - and no more madness in war or peace ! "⁵⁴

In fact, John Galsworthy belonged to the early period of the Twentieth Century, during which it is difficult to find out a writer known merely as the writer of one-act plays. There was no scope for Galsworthy to choose the genre of the one-act play. Yet he preferred the one-act play for specific situations and showed how he could contain his sense of character and occasion in lucid and civilized brevity. David Garnett compares Galsworthy and E.M. Forster. He says, "The two authors who provided exactly what they needed were E.M. Forster and John Galsworthy. They were read with delight for the same reasons."⁵⁵ John Galsworthy was fully aware of the potentiality of the one-act play. His experiment with the verse one-act play cast the shadow of the poetic plays written by Fry and Eliot. Similarly, The First and the Last (1917), paved the path for Harold Pinter's The Room (1957) and The Dumb Waiter (1957). At present the whole climate of the theatre has changed in ways in which Galsworthy certainly played a leading part.