



Research Article

ISSN : 0975-7384  
CODEN(USA) : JCPRC5

## Study of archetypal motifs in *The Forsyte Saga*

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### ABSTRACT

In order to grasp the main theme of *The Forsyte Saga* written by John Galsworthy, we concerned the archetypal motifs in the trilogy. The motifs of pastoral, death and the related images are discussed separately. From the analysis, the motifs are easily connected together and it possesses a special sense for these widely recurring kinds of archetypes.

**Key words:** Archetypal motifs; *The Forsyte Saga*; images; theme

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### INTRODUCTION

Written by John Galsworthy who received the Nobel Prize, *The Forsyte Saga*, possesses a special sense for the archetypes. These archetypal characters, images and narrative pattern are manifestations of the theme of the trilogy. Galsworthy utilizes many archetypal elements such as motifs and images to help accomplish his theme [1]. In this paper, the motifs of pastoral, and death are discussed separately, which serve for revealing the main themes of *The Forsyte Saga*.

Before the analysis, the source of motif should be explained clearly. Coming from French in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the word “motif” refers to a distinctive feature or dominant idea in an artistic or literary composition. It was first used by composers. Wagner attached a specific salient musical motif to some of his major characters. The temperament of the motif produced by this famous musician announces to the audience that the hero is about to appear on stage or refers to some incidents of the plot. In painting, the motif is a striking element identified in several pictures of an individual artist or in a collection of works [2]. Literary criticism uses the term to refer to recurring structure, word pattern, character, contrast or other elements that can help to develop and inform the major themes of the text.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the motif of pastoral is discussed and then the motif of death was analysed and finally, the function of these motifs was explained.

### THE MOTIF OF PASTORAL

*The Forsyte Saga* is a modern version of the pastoral. Edmond L. Caldwell argues that familial ideology posits a state of nature which precedes history and culture, and it idealizes precapitalist forms of social existence: the ideological structure of family is always a structure of nostalgia [3]. There is not only one element in *The Forsyte Saga* reflect the motif of searching for pastoral or spiritual freedom. Pastoral plot is of archetypal quality. It occurs in many places beyond in this novel.

According to the Oxford Companion to English Literature, pastoral is a form of escape literature concerned with country pleasures, which is found in poetry, drama, and prose fiction [4]. The first of the pastoral’s descent is from Theocritus, where the pastoral elegy first appears as a literary adaptation of the ritual of the Adonis lament, and through Theocritus to Virgil and the whole pastoral tradition to *The Shepherdes Calender* and beyond to *Lycidas* itself. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Theocritean vision which had so far satisfied men’s desire to escape from the pressures

of urban life gave place to a more realistic dream of enjoying a rural retreat. Poets like James Thomson extolled country pleasures and represented rural trades as enjoyable, until Crabbe showed that their descriptions were divorced from reality, and Wordsworth taught men to seek comfort in a Nature endowed with visionary power[5]. The whole liberal perspective can be got simply by picking up one conventional work and following its archetypes as they stretch out into the rest of literature.

In the comic fictional modes discussed in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye points out that the mode of romantic comedy corresponding to the elegiac is best described as idyllic, and its chief vehicle is the pastoral. Because of the social interest of comedy, the idyllic cannot equal the introversion of the elegiac, but it preserves the theme of escaping from society to the extent of idealizing a simplified life in the country or on the frontier [5].

In *The Forsyte Saga*, there is an atmosphere of idyll, which attributes to two factors: Galsworthy's natural sensibilities and the impetus of social crises.

In 1864, three years before John Galsworthy was born, his father moved to Surrey, from his London house in Portland Place because he wanted his young family to enjoy a natural, healthy environment. He himself was passionately fond of the country. This is confirmed by his daughter Mabel and grandson Rudolf, who writes: "From my grandfather ... they inherited ... a love of beauty and nature" [6]. He had chosen the site of his house for the lovely view over the Surrey Downs. He turned the place into a rural paradise, neat and cared-for, in the landscaped style dear to English landowners, with grounds, kitchen garden and domestic animals to amuse the children, and provide fresh produce for the whole family. Galsworthy's childhood is spent in this heaven of peace. Mabel confirms the story told by Galsworthy in *Awakening*. In these pages, with their admirably poetic and imaginative style, Jon, she points out, is quite clearly John: "It is easy to form an idea of his childhood, for although some details are distinctly different, the picture he has drawn in the sketch called *Awakening* of the little boy Jon's early life is practically a description of his own" [7].

John Galsworthy and his wife, Ada, preferred the countryside, and they much preferred mountains to the seaside, which failed signally to attract either of them. They loved hilly country, both for its beauty and for the exercise it offered. In fact, Galsworthy loved the town for itself, though he continued to fear its effects on his fellow-men. What he disliked were the ugly outside face of a city, and the overcrowding. He experienced the existence of towns of his day, with their slums, smoke, blackness and dirt, which is considerable painful, so he did not like to live there.

The works of Galsworthy seems to be called into being as a response to perceived social crises, when forces emerge to threaten the continuity of social order. At such moments the discourse of the family and of family values is deployed as a way to evaluate the extent and character of social change. In the process of everyday life — in the realms of home and family, in leisure and consumption practices, in generational and sexual relationships — historical change becomes part of both collective and individual experience. However, these changes do as much to unsettle as to reinforce the reification that marks off the family as a separate sphere of civil society. Finally, in crisis epochs the linear, temporally-homogeneous historical narratives of bourgeois ideology are challenged by the appearance of multiple, nonsynchronous temporalities, residual and emergent historical tendencies which reflect archaic or unrealized modes of life and radically different historical possibilities [3].

In *The Forsyte Saga*, what Galsworthy emphasized is the trend of cherishing the nature and advocating the freedom of spirit. Many descriptions of the nature scenery form a sharp contrast with the moral concepts of possessive individualism and the self-interest pursuit in capitalist society. The Forsyteism created by the times will fight with the pastoral which were viewed as out of date. In nature, pastoral is the materialization of the Beauty. And the contradiction between pastoral and possessive instinct reveals the opposites between art and the values of Forsyteism.

The family tree, appeared in *The Forsyte Saga* several times, is a national organism, linking the living generations of Forsytes with their own, and their nations, pastoral prehistory. When SwithinForsyte falls asleep beneath the emblematic oak tree at the Robin Hill site where Soames plans to build his house for Irene, he seems surrounded by "all the unnumbered generations of his yeoman ancestors, wont of a Sunday to stand akimbo surveying their little plots of land, their grey unmoving eyes hiding their instinct with its hidden roots of violence, their instinct for possession to the exclusion of all the world" [8]. This is the heritage that interests Galsworthy as well as consoles the Forsytes, that English myth of the doughty yeomanry, the independent small farmer, each with his own little plot of land - a myth which stands opposed to the agricultural past of commons rights, the rule of custom, and the moral economy. This pastoral ancestry assures the rootage of the Forsyte family in the soil of Englishness, a pastoral past that will survive in the family itself, as a kind of unchanging kernel or essence which will ultimately survive and be passed on.

The love between Val and Holly forms a sharp contrast with the love based on property, however, the important thing is not to describe the perfection of the love, but to reveal the man's instinct of cherishing the nature. Val's love began with his ride with Holly in the long gallops of Richmond Park. Richmond Park actually is an image of nature, filled with many people who pursue freedom. However, this shift towards the greater personal autonomy of the younger generation of the English middle class is paradoxically part of a macroscopic shift producing intensified restriction and oppression in other domains. The newer Forsytes wish to disport themselves in playful autonomy in the culture of the commodity and the wealth of Empire; this wealth, however, is dependent on the political oppression and economic exploitation of imperial subjects in the peripheries: greater autonomy at home entails greater exploitation abroad. The Boer War is an icebreaker. The family breaks into factions, anti-Boer and pro-Boer, with the pro-Boer position represented by young Jolyon and his children, June and Jolly, the less possessive, more humane branch of the Forsytes. When young Jolyon's son Jolly challenges Soames' nephew Val to volunteer to fight in South Africa in an attempt to draw the latter away from a romantic attachment to his sister Holly and the two go off to fight, even the pro-Boers in the family begin to rethink their positions. Holly, and then that staunch defender of the Boers, June, follows the male Forsyte soldiers as Red Cross nurses; collectively these enlistments are viewed by the rest of the family as "extreme" and "subversive of pure Forsyteism"[8]. After the war, Val married Holly and they spent twenty years in Africa. Later, they came back, lived in an old manor-house on the north side of the Sussex Downs, and led a happy life. The life of Val and Holly is completely confined to the Nature closely. The escaping from big city of the two symbolizes that they have escaped from the new mass society and patriarchal form successfully. They are in the pursuit of freedom, including the outer freedom and the inner freedom.

Nature forms the basis, the ground, for both narrative discourses, that of the family's decline and that of its human improvement. Ultimately this view of nature serves to predict people's searching for freedom in the depressed status. Irene's own role in the whole trilogy is the object of aesthetic worship. She carries the pastoral with her; she is the moral instructor and better angel of those male characters who do not seek to possess her, and the destroyer of the characters who do. The course of her smashing the spiritual shackles placed by Soames is her pursuit of freedom. She loves Bosinney, because she can get the very un-Forsyte like pursuit of pleasure. Even Soames himself evinces a creeping longing for the pastoral. He is a collector of pictures, and one with excellent taste. His mysterious revolt acquires independent expression in the form of his wife's lover, the architect Philip Bosinney, a bohemian figure who is the subject of the Forsyte family's mingled contempt and envious fascination. The figure of Irene looms over both the apocalyptic and the pastoral dimensions of the ending. Just as nature and beauty are linked in the aesthetically-based philosophy of the moral philosophers, they are conjoined in Irene. She carries the pastoral with her; she is the moral instructor and better angel of those male characters who do not seek to possess her, and the destroyer of the characters who do. The image of Irene runs through the whole book, and her final leaving symbolizes that she has shook off the yoke of the Forsytes ethical code, and has obtained the really freedom, mentally and physically. The motif of pastoral expressed by Irene is a ceaseless repetition.

Another character, Fleur, expresses the same motif, but her pursuit of freedom is more difficult than others. The third generation of Forsytes- born at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and coming of age during the Great War and the twenties -displays a marked mingling of traditional gender traits. The generation of Soames' daughter Fleur and young Jolyon's son Jon, grow up. Fleur has fallen in love with Jon after accidental meetings at June Forsyte's art gallery and the confectioner's nearby. They understood each other on the green Downs. They both admire Nature, but Fleur's admiration of Nature was confused by a Forsyte's instinct for getting something out of it. She was always more possessive than Jon, and her aim was only love. Yet, Jon, like his sister had said, was going to be a farmer and a poet, which is the potential yearning for pastoral. Fleur is capable of telling a central lie when she says to Jon that she knows no more of their parents' past than he does. And the lie doubles back, hurting Jon, who is priggish in dismissing her defense that she lied to him out of love. Fleur also manoeuvres Soames, works on his love for her to push him into approaching Irene to plead for the young love-a plea that neither Fleur nor Soames can recognize as the irrelevant gesture it is. The feud stops her love searching, which, essentially, is the liberal searching. The longing for freedom is completely reflected in Chapter Eight of Part One in *To Let*. Under the pressure of social crises and historical background, the young generations of Forsyte's thirsting for freedom can be understood. The later failure of Fleur's plan is not precisely a failure because Galsworthy's insistent naturalization of properly social and historical phenomena, namely both the selfish possessive instinct and ethically-awakening aesthetic spirit cannot be given up.

At the end of the trilogy, pastoral nature overarches this human scene: trees, clouds, and in particular the sickle of a moon pale in the sky. Therefore, the motif of pastoral reflected in Galsworthy's work shows the harmony of beauty and the unity of perfection

### THE MOTIF OF DEATH

The plot of *The Forsyte Saga* is the mode of sentimental domestic comedy. However, the main theme of the trilogy is the decline of a family or the dispossession of the Forsyteism. This decline is portrayed as part and parcel of the decline of England and the values of the Victorian middle class. In this plot, the family's decline is a "fortunate fall" from a masculinist utilitarian instrumentality to the kinder, gentler operational principles of the "feminized" moral and aesthetic sense, in which people and things are supposedly allowed to subsist in the unreified state of being for themselves. In fact, the decline of the Forsyte family is the death of the old order and the birth of the new society, which is deepened by the image of death in this trilogy.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, insurgent social forces-workers, women, and oppressed nationalities-challenged hegemonic institutions and ideologies. This is a period in which, put bluntly, the masses make history. This crisis was not confined to the British Isles but was international in character, registering an epochal shift in the capitalist mode of production itself, what is conventionally viewed as the shift from competitive to monopoly capitalism and the rise of "mass" commodity culture. The development of Britain was influenced by the decline of British industry and by Britain's material and ideological reliance on imperialism in its failed bid to offset this decline.

The decline of the Forsyte family changes into another kind of form, a unity of lands and money at last. Fleur's wedding is the union of the great-granddaughter of Superior Dosset with the heir of a ninth baronet, which shows the merger of class in class which buttresses the political stability of a realm. The process conforms to the objective laws of natural development.

As Northrop Frye explains the theory of mythos, he refers to the process of life. He thinks that the fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death which is the rhythm of process. In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth, or the disappearance and return, or the incarnation and withdrawal, of a god. This divine activity is usually identified or associated with one or more of the cyclical processes of nature. The god may be a sun-god, dying at night and reborn at dawn, or else with an annual rebirth at the winter solstice; or he may be a god of vegetation, dying in autumn and reviving in spring, or he may be an incarnate god going through a series of human or animal life-cycles. As a god is almost by definition immortal, it is a regular feature of all such myths that the dying god is reborn as the same person[5]. Hence the mythical or abstract structural principle of the cycle is that the continuum of identity in the individual life from birth to death is extended from death to rebirth. To this pattern of identical recurrence, the death and revival of the same individual, all other cyclical patterns are as a rule assimilated.

The self-inflicted death is followed by a lament for the loss of the hero and the barrenness of the land. The lament is usually expressed by women. While the death of the hero and his association with the female force holds the promise of new life. The hero's death is an act of positive benefit to mankind. Sir James Frazer writes at length of this scapegoat aspect of the hero's death. He points out that kings who in certain societies were killed at the end of preordained reigns or at such times as the societies required very special sacrifices. And it brings people to the immediate meaning of the myth. The hero faces death and dies for people. In doing so, he holds out a promise of new life through his sacrifice. He thus also shows something of the positive nature of death as the catalyst for a new birth through the spirit. As always, the hero is the symbol of man in search of himself [9]. At this stage, death becomes increasingly measuring rod in the later part of life. The hero stands physically annihilated at the edge of the kingdom of Death. The period of life's initiation has passed; the process of individuation moves away from the deeds of the body back to those of the spirit. The hero stands with human kind face to face with the unknown. The voyage into the unknown is initiated by death.

At the beginning of *The Forsyte Saga*, the narrator expresses the Forsytes' view on death: "when a Forsyte died-but no Forsyte had as yet died; they did not die; death being contrary to their principles, they took precautions against it, the instinctive precautions of highly vitalized persons who resent encroachments on their property" [8]. The Forsytes, as Galsworthy explained in the first response to Garnett, cannot be defeated by escaping or by changing in the exterior world, for they can accommodate themselves to any exterior change. Rather, in their tenacity and adaptability, they can only be defeated from within, through atrophy or, like Soames at the end of the novel, holding on to what has withered in their grasp. Finally, only death can defeat Forsytes. The death of Aunt Ann, at the first part of the novel, initiates the decline, but the death of Bosinney is more central and more damaging. Aunt Ann who could not fight with Nature, had died while the Forsytes was yet whole, which was the final triumph of her. In accordance with this rule, pride comes before a fall, the greatest of Nature's ironies, the Forsyte family had gathered for a last proud pageant before they fall. The funeral can be regarded as a kind of rites, which reminds everyone in the family that death will come to them one by one. Though it is a painful thing, it cannot be avoided, because death equals to birth, which is a law of Nature. For Bosinney, his death is filled with tragic sense. He was run over by a cab in the fog and killed. As a scapegoat, Bosinney has to die, because his death brings benefits to the Forsyte family.

The Robin Hill's house can be viewed as the rebirth of Bosinney, because this house represents his soul and the appreciation of the beauty.

After the death of Aunt Ann, as time goes on, the old generations of the Forsytes are conscious of the upcoming death. It is old Jolyon, then Swithin, Susan, Roger, James, Julia, Hester, Nicholas, and the last one Timothy, who, the representatives of the Forsyteism, realize that they cannot possess permanently. According to the displacement theory of Frye, James was dead when his granddaughter was born, which corresponds to the myth of death and rebirth. In addition, the death of young Jolyon plays a significant role in this trilogy. His letter to his son exposed the secret of the feud between the two branches of the Forsytes, stopped the love of Fleur and Jon, and actually stopped the decline of the Forsyte family. Fleur's marriage with the heir of a ninth baronet, indeed, made the status of the Forsyte family promoted.

The deaths described above, except for Bosinney's, belong to natural death. Moreover, in the story, the funeral of Queen Victoria is also described, which is meaningful, and indicates the passing of an age. "There it was — the bier of the Queen, coffin of the Age slow passing! And as it went by there came a murmuring groan from all the long line of those who watched, ... Tribute of an Age to its own death"[8]. In fact, no one can hold on forever. It symbolizes that the possessive instinct is out of date.

In Western literature the motif of death keeps emerging before the reader. Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* is no exception. And the motif naturally and reasonably facilitates the presentation of Galsworthy's theme.

### CONCLUSION

The theme of *The Forsyte Saga* is the unchangeable trend of family decline and people's searching for freedom through struggling with the traditional boundaries. The cycle of human's activity and spiritual journey is an important point that Galsworthy proves again and again in this masterpiece. From the analysis, the motifs can be easily connected together. Father mainly represents the sovereign of human beings; pastoral can be viewed as nature or environment; death refers to the circle of life and nature. Galsworthy uses the three hints to explain the essential problems of the real world.

### Acknowledgments

The work was supported by the Foundation of Humanities and Social Science Research Projects of Education Department of Hebei Province (SQ125001) and Youth Foundation of Hebei University.

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