Reading the Strange Silence:"Irene's Acquiescence in Galsworthy's The Man of Property".

Linda Strahan[1]

1. University of California Riverside, USA, E-mail: lstrahan@ucr.edu

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Astract

Irene's unhappy marriage to Soames Forsyte has become a metaphor for the plight of women in nineteenth century England before the passage of the Woman's Property Act (1881) and the agitation for further reforms. The fact that Irene never agreed to a union with Soames seems inconceivable to contemporary readers as her reluctance is obvious from the beginning. Scholars have tried to explain in various ways Irene's acceptance of Soames fifth time he proposes, but none of their explanations is ultimately convincing. Irene herself when asked responds only with a "strange silence". While certainly some of the social and economic factors critics mention contribute to Irene's decision, I argue that the actual reason is something more insidious and sinister: sexual abuse.
Using the work of Michael Foucaut in *The History of Sexuality* and sociological studies of the behavior of victims of sexual abuse to examine the character of Irene in the novel, this paper reveals that Irene has both the personality and characteristic behaviors consistent with early sexual abuse. She's seductive in her appearance, yet repelled by the interest her appearance generates in her own husband and other men. Nevertheless, she flagrantly has an affair with a much younger man. The complex psychological process called "Acting Out" explains the extremes of her behavior.
Irene's pathology mirrors that of Galsworthy's own wife, Ada. It is understood by Galsworthy scholars, that in spite of the author's belief that he had hidden the similarities, *The Man of Property* tells the story of Ada and her unhappy first marriage to Galsworthy's cousin Arthur. Though Galsworthy himself was probably unaware of the psychological implications inherent in his narrative, today's reader of the novel can recognize the pattern of trauma and repression present in the story of Irene and most likely in the life of Ada Galsworthy as well.

Key words: John Galsworthy, "The Man of Property", sexual abuse, phychological problems, behavior, trauma.

Resumen

El matrimonio infeliz de Irene con Soames Forsyte metaforiza la situación apremiante de las mujeres del siglo XIX en Inglaterra antes de la Ley de Bienes de las Mujeres Casadas (*Married Woman's Property Act,* 1881) y la agitación de reformas posteriores. Para los lectores actuales parece inconcebible que Irene aprobará su unión con Soames, siendo que desde el comienzo ella lo rechazó. Los estudiosos han tratado de explicar de diferentes maneras el por qué del sí de Irene tras la quinta proposición matrimonial de Soames. Sin embargo, ninguna de tales explicaciones es convincente.
Soames le pregunta a Irene y ella responde con un "extraño silencio". Aunque en las críticas se postule que los factores sociales y económicos incidieron en la decisión de Irene, mi argumento se basa en un problema más insidioso y siniestro, es decir, abuso sexual.
Para analizar el personaje de Irene, me he basado en el libro *La historia de la sexualidad* de Michel Foucault y en las investigaciones sobre el comportamiento de las víctimas de abuso sexual. Este artículo deja entrever que un abuso sexual a temprana edad explica su comportamiento y personalidad. Su apariencia es seductora y rechazada a la vez por su esposo y otro hombre. No

obstante, ella descaradamente tiene una aventura con un joven. Este complejo proceso psicológico se denomina “representar” y explica lo extremo de su comportamiento.
La patología de Irene se refleja en la propia vida de Galsworthy. Los estudiosos de este autor han comprendido que pese a que él cree haber escondido las similitudes, *El propietario* cuenta la historia de Ada y su primer matrimonio infeliz con el primo de Galsworthy. Aunque este autor no estaba conciente de las consecuencias psicológicas inherentes en su narrativa, los lectores actuales de la novela pueden reconocer el patrón de trauma y represión en la historia de Irene y también probablemente más en la vida de Ada y Galsworthy.

Palabras claves: John Galsworthy, “El Propietario”, abuso sexual, problemas psicològicos, conducta, trauma.

Irene’s unhappy marriage to Soames Forsyte has become a metaphor for the plight of women in nineteenth century England before the passage of the Woman’s Property Act (1881) and the agitation for further reforms. The fact that Irene ever agreed to marry Soames seems, to contemporary readers, inconceivable. The failure of the union is so obvious that at one point in the novel Soames himself asks, “then why did she marry me?” (Galsworthy 49) Even the most romantic and sympathetic of readers has had to strain credulity to answer that question and explain Irene’s ultimate acquiescence to Soames’s marriage proposal. Relentless pressure from Soames, Irene's stepmother, and society; the limited options of women in the late Victorian period; and youthful naivete are the traditional excuses offered by readers, scholars (Barker 49), and Galsworthy’s own circle (Sauter 79). While these factors undeniably contributed to Irene’s decision, I suspect that the actual reason was something more insidious and sinister: sexual abuse.

Soames pursued Irene doggedly for over a year; he himself became “quite thin dancing attendance on her” (Galswowrthy 9). During that time she remained unresponsive. Her widowed stepmother allied herself with Soames from the beginning. Irene’s burgeoning beauty and financial dependence were seen by Mrs. Heron as a liability against her own chances in the marriage market (Galsworthy 319), and she recognizes there is an advantage for both of them in a liaison between her stepdaughter and a man of property. Still, in spite of the absence of other suitors (It is said that Soames’s “perpetual presence” discouraged them.) (Galsworthy 50) and the obvious suitability of Soames, Irene refused his proposal four times. The fifth time Irene accepts. Soames himself is elated and confused: “what made her yield he could never make out” (Galsworthy 104). But the discerning reader who remembers what Soames has forgotten, “the day when, adroitly taking advantage of an acute phase of her dislike to her home surroundings, he crowned his labors with success” (Galsworthy 50), will also remember the “strange silence” Irene offers as explanation (Galsworthy 104). By reading the text of silence, Irene’s behavior becomes less enigmatic. Her acceptance of Soames’s proposal and her behavior throughout the trilogy form a pattern consistent with that of a victim of sexual abuse. Unfortunately, my research has not led me to the point where I can conclusively identify the abuse. The space of time between the fourth and fifth proposal, the stepmother’s desire to remarry and her fear of Irene’s attractiveness suggest an unidentified third party who may have forced unwanted attentions upon young Irene during this time. Still, the abuse could as easily have occurred earlier and continued or intensified in fact or memory. So, the perpetrator could have been her own father or the looming figure of her stepmother, who seems to vanish completely from her life after her marriage to Soames. Without more corroboration from Irene herself it is difficult to be precise. And in the novel Irene is somewhat of a cipher. As Holloway points our about her:

> She has quite deliberately no personality of her own. As the author himself said: ‘She is never presents except through the senses of other characters.’ There is Soames’s Irene, Bosinney’s Irene, Jolyon’s Irene, finally there is the Reader’s own Irene (Holloway 3).

The “reader’s own Irene,” seen through the hindsight offered by almost one hundred years of history and psychology, retains her traditional symbolic value as victim of passion and possession. These terms, however, reverberate with nuances which before were indistinct.

The work of Michel Foucault is responsible to a large degree for this new clarity. In his The History of Sexuality he discusses the discourse of silence. He explains in Part One, “We ‘Other Victorians’,” that by the nineteenth century, “On the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (Foucault 3). On the surface, in the discourse of legitimate society, sex ceased to exist; although outside legitimate society, in the brothels and mental institutions, it was tolerated but never recognized: “Everywhere else modern Puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence” (Foucault 4-5). Thus, though the prohibition of sexual crimes existed “on the books,” the hypocrisy of society prohibited for the most part their application. It is interesting to

note that in the age of post Dickensian awareness of child abuse in Great Britain research shows that police involvement was basically on the rise for other acts of violence toward women and children, but social/sexual transgressions were handled differently (Behlmer 1-16). Research also suggests that in the large number of families in which the death of the mother required the oldest daughter to assume the dead mother's responsibilities, the fact that the daughter became "wife" in all ways was tacitly ignored (Gordon 5-6). Foucault points out that in this period "sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the house" (Foucault 3). When inappropriate sexual activity, at times involving children or adolescents, became blatant, the perpetration was punished in an odd way. The police were not called, but the neighbors might subject the home to "rough music," a cacophony of noises produced by pots, pans and the like (Behlmer 15). This "punishment" punishes the victim as well as the perpetrator and coerces children of all ages and levels of society (even those in the lower levels or in rural settings where living conditions, close quarters, and lack of servants, contribute to this particular situation) to participate in repression and silence. It is important to recognize repression as both product and producer. The result of all discourse is production in some form. In the case of a dialectic consisting exclusively of silence, the end product, or result, is repression. Repression itself, however, is productive in that it causes certain predictable behaviors. So it is that Soames Forstye, in the eyes of Galsworthy and the world, the epitome of bourgeois capitalism, comes to possess a wife whose behavior both mystifies and enrages him. Deafened by the pervasive discourse of silence, he can not hear the answer to his own pathetic question about Irene.

Indeed, John Galsworthy also was deaf to the implications of the words he wrote. His handicap was both historical and biographical. Beginning his novel in 1903 at the age of thirty-six, he had listened to the discourse of silence for all his formative years. It had obliterated his ability or willingness to hear any other. So even two decades later when Freudian theory "enabled novelists to look at their characters in new ways and find fresh motives for their behavior, Galsworthy, even though aware of Freud's theories, would not have thought it reasonable or even right to explain, say, the relationship between Soames Forsyte and his wife Irene in Freudian terms" (Holloway 3). To do so would have forced Galsworthy to examine situations in his own life and confront unacknowledged facts about his own wife Ada that he would prefer not to know. It is understood by Galsworthy scholars that "The story of Irene is, of course, the story of Ada; in his letter to Lillian Galsworthy admits this, though he professes to believe that she will not be recognized, except by a few members of the family who know the facts of his affair because 'I have changed her hair to gold'" (Dupre 114). This naïve assumption that society remains unaware of the sexual nature of his relationship with his cousin's then-wife can be attributed only to the discourse of silence. The implications of this kind of thinking by the author have further relevance to the argument of this essay. Even after her divorce from Arthur Galsworthy and her marriage to John Galsworthy, Ada was difficult. She suffered from "poor health" and had to be cosseted and entertained like a sick child. Continual travel to warm climates, even though it interfered with Galsworthy's writing and career, were necessary. After his death in 1932, she lived on more than twenty years and never again left England. Biographers, other than those like H. V. Marrot whose 1935 book was written with Ada's help and advice, for the most part consider Ada to have been somewhat unstable. Galsworthy too was aware that she had problems and allowed nothing to upset her. It was an accepted fact that visitors to the Galsworthy home were to cater to Ada in every situation:

> A nephew remembers beating Ada one evening at a game of billiards, a favorite family game. Galsworthy led him gently into a corner to tell him privately, "You must understand, my dear old man, in this house Aunty always wins" (Barker 12).

Galsworthy, nevertheless, preferred to attribute all of Ada's neurotic behavior to her unhappy first marriage. An astute biographer, such as Catherine Dupre, refuses to accept such a simplistic explanation and considering Ada's background and formative years concludes:

That this first period of her life was extremely unhappy is obvious, so unhappy that it seems probable that the scars of her childhood, Rather than her notoriously unsuccessful marriage to Arthur Galsworthy, made her the frail and emotionally unstable person that she was (Dupre 50).

Knowing that except for the hair tint Ada is Irene (Strahan 158), the failure of Galsworthy to provide complete background information on Irene in the text is understandable. A close examination though of the Irene, whose mere presence instigates the events of The Man of Property and propels the whole of The Forsyte Saga, allows a clearer understanding than even Galsworthy himself may have intended.

Part of Irene's charm is her passivity. In the novel she is described more than once as "passive" (Galsworthy 50, 461). She is victimized, through no fault of her own, by others and by her own beauty. Galsworthy later referred to her in his Preface to The Forsyte Saga written for The Manaton Edition in 1922 as "a concretion of disturbing Beauty impinging on a possessive world" (Galsworthy viii). This seemingly innocuous characterization is highly significant in terms of the profile of sexual abuse victims. Their early trauma has had a serious impact on their self esteem leaving them unable to assert their own will in any situation (Finkelhor 194). Irene's inability to stand up for herself in matters small as well as large is seen in the incident of the feathers. Irene "who was always so beautifully dressed – " (Galsworthy 7) represses her own good taste and preference and never again wears feathers after June Forsyte pronounces them "vulgar" (Galsworthy 7), perhaps here a telling word choice. Irene's particular kind of good looks, the light hair and dark eyes, are said to be "the mark of a weak character" (Galsworthy 9), as if that explains her failure to speak up or speak out. And that silence itself, commented upon by many throughout the novel is finally analyzed by James Forsyte: "it was not the silence of obstinacy, rather that of acquiescence" (Galsworthy 210).

This silence acquiescence has far more disturbing consequences for abuse victims than mere indecisiveness in matters of fashion; it makes them what Finkelhor, a leading researcher in this area, calls "conspicuous 'targets' for sexually exploitive men. These victims may also lack the assertiveness necessary to short-circuit it in early stage encounters where they sense some risk" (Finkelhor 194). Herein lies a partial explanation for Irene's early relationship with Soames. Though Soames's intentions toward her were honorable, they were unwanted and bordered on what today might be termed "harassment." The passivity that makes her incapable of any but token resistance mimics the behavior common to sex abuse victims. Mrs. MacAnder, that trouble-making matron in the novel, criticizes Irene for having "no 'go' about her – she would never be able to stand up for herself – anyone could take advantage of her, that was plain – she [Mrs. MacAnder] could not see in fact what men found to admire" (Galsworthy 225)! Mrs. MacAnder, of course, correctly senses Irene's ripeness for victimization, but fails to recognize the subtly seductive behavior that men often think invites it.

The complex psychological process that can result in "Acting Out," seductive dress or seductive mannerisms, in the female survivor of childhood rape or molestation may be attributed in part to the victim's tendency to blame herself for her misfortune. The pathology which causes the victim to perpetuate and even exaggerate behavior she feels was originally responsible for her abuse is commonly recognized. Although most victim's lives do not mirror the bizarre extremes of characters on television dramas who have experienced sexual abuse, such as General Hospital's Karen, a demure pre-med student by day who becomes a strip tease dancer at night after her molester returns to Port Charles, the commonplace, or myth, here is solidly grounded in fact: "these forms of sexual acting-out are representative of Post-Incest Syndrome" (Bloom 197). Irene's dress and mannerisms are such "that men looked" (Gaslsworthy 68). It is, in fact, her obvious effect on men that makes her valuable to Soames because "They could not go anywhere without his seeing how all the men were attracted by her; their looks, manners, voices, betrayed it; her behavior under this attention had been beyond reproach" (Galsworthy 49). She does not, therefore, flaunt her body in an unseemly fashion, but her clothes in cut and color are

carefully selected to show it to advantage. The author, unable to describe her style more accurately calls her hue selection "French grey" (Galsworthy 634). Throughout the saga Irene is shown to have an affinity with things French; she actually chooses when estranged to live in Paris. To a proper Englishman in this period, being "French" is tantamount to being "risqué" and Irene has a, well, "foreign look" (Galsworthy 18). Body language, or movement, figures prominently in seductive behavior. Certain postures, a walk, a look, are considered open invitations to sexual advances. Irene never walks across a room or strolls through a park or gallery; she "sways." Just standing in Old Jolyon's drawing room, "Her figure swayed, so balanced that the very air seemed to set it moving" (Galsworthy 68). The sensuous quality of such a description is seductive in and of itself and projects the power of the sexual magnetism of the woman it describes. While Soames secretly gloated over the effect of Irene's seductive beauty on other men, he himself was not immune to that effect. Five years of marriage did not lessen his "overmastering hunger" for her (Galsworthy 246). At a seminal point in the novel, Soames, that self-contained, proper Englishman, looses control and rapes his own wife, or as it is put in the novel "asserted his rights and acted like a man" (Galsworthy 246). Reflecting on his uncharacteristic behavior of the previous night, Soames finds "now that he had acted like this, he was surprised at himself" (Galsworthy 246). In terms of Irene's profile as a survivor of sexual abuse, the second victimization is not surprising:

There is repeated suggestion in the literature that women who are victims of childhood sexual abuse become victims later in life as well. Several investigations have found unusually large incidences of childhood sexual victimization in the histories of rape victims including marital rape victims (Finkelhor 193).

The marital rape of Irene has far-reaching consequences in the plot of The Man of Property and ultimately in the final book of the trilogy To Let and suggests certain private and public concerns of Galsworthy as well. Its importance here, however, is as a further indication that Irene's life experiences parallel those who suffer from Post-Incest Syndrome. In addition, the comfort that Soames derives from the fact that "No one would know – it was not the sort of thing that she would speak about" shows that Irene was a full participant in the discourse of silence (Galsworthy 247).

The discourse of silence may prohibit frank discussion or even a tacit acknowledgement of sexual problems, but nothing discourages gossip. It was commonly rumored on Forsyte 'Change that Soames and his wife did not "get on." Servants being what they are, it was a known fact that Irene had asked for separate rooms (Galsworthy 9, 45, 143). In the many-roomed houses of people of the Forsyte's class, this arrangement was neither unusual nor suspicious in and of itself. Other signs were there. Soames's physical need and frustrated desire for intimacy with Irene are apparent:

He was seldom, indeed, far from Irene's side at public functions, and even when separated by the exigencies of social intercourse, could be seen following her about with his eyes, in which were strange expressions of watchfulness and longing (Galsworthy 69).

Though Irene is not known always to have resisted Soames's advances, she has never welcomed them. Her behavior puzzles and angers him; it is more than shyness or prudishness; it is revulsion: "The profound, subdued aversion which he felt in his wife was a mystery to him" (Galsworthy 49). It is not mysterious at all if Irene is an adult survivor of a childhood sexual crime. Westerlund reporting on the "lifestyle" of 14% of the female victims in her study uses the words "repulsion," "aversion," and "avoidance" (Westerlund 65). Soames astutely senses that Irene's sexual aversion is not engendered by him alone; there seem to be "secret springs … [feeding] her resistance" which manifest themselves as a "shudder" (Galsworthy 103-104). That "shudder" is not reserved for Soames alone, but is also experienced by Montague Dartie, Irene's brother-in-law, when he sits on a bench too close to Irene. The familial relationship between Irene and Montague would increase her sensitivity to his persistent physical intrusiveness and explain her alarm if she indeed is a victim of that most heinous form of sexual abuse, incest.

Bloom, who interviewed many adult victims of childhood abuse, discovered that commonly it is the "incest survivors [who] may not tolerate being touched because of the sexual trauma" (Bloom 3).

On the other hand, it is tempting to accept Irene's feelings of revulsion toward Soames and Montague as entirely logical. After all, it appears that she did not find the attentions of Phillip Bossiney, and later Young Jolyon Forsyte, unwelcome. Yet neither Soames nor Montague are unattractive or disagreeable to most women. Soames is always carefully groomed; his appearance a source of pride and comfort to the older generation female Forsytes, and he himself "could not understand what she [Irene] found wrong with him. It was not as if he drank! Did he run into debt, or gamble or swear; was he violent; were his friends rackety; did he stay out all night? On the contrary" (Galsworthy 123). Montague Dartie, of course, did all of those things. He considered himself a "sportsman" and was often seen about town with the ladies, albeit those of a certain class, actresses and the like. Even after he has stolen his wife Winifred's pearls, the ultimate sin in the eyes of the Forsytes, who worship property, and run off to Buenos Aires with a dancer, he is able to charm his way back into his old life, his home, and presumably his wife's bed. In the matter of the human heart preference is often difficult to explain. Yet Irene's warm response to Bosinney and cold response to Soames can be construed as something more complex than a mere matter of taste. Westerlund reports "confusion" in the area of sexual desire in 37% of the respondents to her questionnaire. The confusion took many forms and often centered around issues of power and control. At times, the victims were confused "over whether they were attracted or repulsed. In some instances the attraction was to someone who resembled the offender in appearance or behavior, and this created confusion" (Westerlund 78). As the perpetrator in Irene's case is unknown, a definitive explanation for her particular preferences remains elusive. Certain facts may or may not be relevant. Soames is rich, powerful and decisive. He attempts to placate Irene with expensive gifts. Bosinney, her lover, is young, bohemian, and barely able to take care of himself. Jolyon, whom she marries in a later novel, is much older than she and a loving father, but one who refuses to interfere in his children's lives. While these facts are provocative, they are conclusive of nothing. They simply augment, in a suggestive fashion, the extremes of Irene's behavior in sexual matters She is disgusted by both the legitimate advances of her husband and the illegitimate ones of her brother-in-law, but is quite willing even in the repressive sexual climate of that era to indulge openly in an extra-marital affair. Obviously not every woman who hates her brother-in-law and cheats on her husband is the victim of sexual abuse, but Irene does these things with a passion and recklessness that seem abnormal. She has no regard for consequences or personal safety. In fact, returning home in a carriage with Swithin Forsyte after a visit to her lover, she is unmoved by a close escape from an accident and possible death. Swithin reports that she remained "cool" and "behaved as if she didn't care whether she broke her neck or not" (Galsworthy 123)! This blatant ambivalence toward life itself occurs in sexual abuse victim: "They may be actively self destructive or passively so" (Bloom 91). In any case it signifies confusion, a confusion engendered by the conflicting forces of sexual desire and sexual aversion. Irene, in The Man of Property, appears to experience both of these forces simultaneously.

Sexual confusion in incest survivors often results in another sexual behavior: prostitution. While 47% of the victims studied by Westerlund were promiscuous at some period of their lives, 12% became actual prostitutes (Westerlund 68-69). These statistics bear no relevance to Irene of the novel, but it is interesting to note that in the short story by Galsworthy, "Indian Summer of a Forsyte," Irene reappears as a kind of self-appointed social worker/friend to the prostitutes of London. Old Jolyon gives her money to help in her work: "Assisting the Magdalenes of London" (Galsworthy 306)! Though she herself is not driven by her past or her present to such behavior, she obviously feels an empathy for or kinship with those who are.

The empathy, or sympathetic understanding at least, of present day readers for the character of Irene, trapped in a loveless marriage to a man she detests, is

increased by the revelations and relevance of recent historical, sociological and psychological research. Her initial acquiescence and ultimate repudiation, that before seemed somehow both puzzling and highly romantic, now appear predictable and fraught with pathos. This behavior, which occasions Soames's anguished question, finds a cause and an answer within the discourse of silence. It speaks of trauma, repression, and sexual abuse.

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