

## A Sociological Analysis of Yasmina Reza's Play Art

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### Abstract

*The sociology of literature studies the relationship between literary texts and the social, political, and economic structures that shape them. Lucien Goldmann argues that literary works are not mere reflections of socio-economic conditions, but aesthetic forms through which collective consciousness becomes visible. Using Goldmann's genetic structuralist method (comprehension and explanation), this study conducts a sociological reading of Yasmina Reza's play Art to explore how social class and cultural taste organize interpersonal conflict and cultural judgment. The research is fundamental in objective, descriptive-analytical in method, and relies on library-based data collection. The play presents three friends—Serge, Marc, and Ivan—whose relationship is disrupted after Serge buys an expensive, almost entirely white modern painting. The analysis shows that each character embodies a distinct socio-economic position that produces different tastes and strategies: Marc's classical orientation and intolerance of opposing views, Serge's investment in modern art and status signaling, and Ivan's indecision and desire to maintain social harmony. These tensions reveal how taste is socially constructed and how cultural legitimacy tends to be shaped by the upper classes. The study argues that investigating such social and political dimensions can help readers and theatre practitioners uncover non-dramatic layers that matter for interpretation, adaptation, and performance.*

**Keywords**— Lucien Goldmann; Yasmina Reza; Art; Genetic structuralism; Sociological criticism of literature

### I. INTRODUCTION

Every literary work is influenced by society and its transformations and, to some extent, also influences that society. The study of this mutual impact is a central concern of the sociology of literature. The historical roots of sociological criticism are often traced to early nineteenth-century thinkers who tried to understand how society appears within literature and how such representation is produced. Later, twentieth-century theorists influenced by Marxism emphasized the reciprocal relationship between social structures and literary structures. Within this intellectual lineage, Lucien Goldmann proposed a method to clarify the relationship between social structures and the structure of literary works.

Goldmann's genetic structuralism rests on the idea that human actions are meaningful responses to problems posed by the surrounding environment. Consequently, literary works, as human productions, have meaning, and each work can be approached as a coherent totality. For Goldmann, the true creators of literary works are not isolated individuals but social groups or classes, because writers—through their environment, lived experience, and social standing—inevitably belong

to specific collective positions. A key concept in this approach is worldview: a coherent perspective on the totality of reality that belongs to a social group at a given historical moment. The critic's task is to move from the work's dominant theme toward the mental structure embedded within it, and then to relate that structure to the collective consciousness of the relevant social group.

This study employs Goldmann's genetic criticism to read Yasmina Reza's play Art sociologically, with the aim of uncovering how the play dramatizes contemporary French society through conflicts over culture and taste. The play focuses on the friendship between three individuals from different socio-economic classes and shows how class influences personal choices and cultural tastes. The text suggests that cultural activities do not have value in themselves; rather, their value is socially attributed, often according to the class position of those who claim or validate them. Such a perspective guides the present analysis, which also underscores the practical relevance of sociological interpretation for theatre adaptation and performance.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To apply Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralist method to Yasmina Reza's *Art* and identify its meaningful structure through the comprehension stage.
- 2) To interpret the work's objective meaning by linking its dominant structure to socio-economic and cultural conditions through the explanation stage.
- 3) To analyze how social class differentiation shapes cultural taste, judgment, and conflict among the characters Marc, Serge, and Ivan.
- 4) To clarify how sociological reading can guide readers and theatre practitioners toward uncovering non-dramatic layers relevant to interpretation and performance.

## III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is fundamental in objective and uses a descriptive–analytical methodology. Data collection is library-based. The theoretical framework is Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism. Methodologically, the analysis proceeds on two levels. In the comprehension stage, the study examines textual elements—especially dramatic characters and their relationships—to identify reciprocal relations and the work's governing structure. In the explanation stage, the objective meaning derived from comprehension is related to social, economic, and cultural factors of the period, showing how collective consciousness and the mental structure of a social group can appear in aesthetic form. The play text is treated as the primary source, while sociological concepts used in the article (e.g., worldview, totality, maximum possible consciousness, and reification) guide interpretation. No experimental, statistical, or clinical procedures are used.

## IV. RESULTS

The comprehension stage indicates that the painting functions as a symbolic object through which the characters negotiate friendship, authority, and cultural legitimacy. Because the protagonists occupy different socio-economic positions, they interpret the same cultural object differently. The results are presented through character-based analysis.

### 1) Summary of the Play

The play *Art* tells the story of three friends. Serge spends a very large sum of money to purchase a completely white modern painting by a renowned artist. Marc reacts strongly to the purchase, and Ivan responds more mildly.

The dispute over the painting becomes a trigger for deeper conflict among the three friends as they reveal negative thoughts about one another. Eventually, Serge agrees to let Marc draw an Eskimo on the painting to preserve their friendship, while Marc does not know the ink is washable. The homes of the three characters are distinguished only by the different paintings hanging on their walls.

### 2) Character-Based Findings

#### 2.1 Marc

Marc is an aerospace engineer whose income is lower than Serge's but higher than Ivan's. He approaches matters logically and values material aspects of decisions. He finds it difficult to tolerate opposing viewpoints and is positioned as an opponent of modernism and a supporter of classical art. These traits shape his response to Serge's purchase of the white painting.

Marc frames Serge's action as deception and social display, arguing that Serge is being misled to show off. This response suggests that aesthetic judgment becomes a moral verdict inside friendship: Marc expects others to share his standard of legitimate taste and reacts harshly when that standard is challenged.

Marc's stance also structures his treatment of Ivan. He considers Ivan weak and indecisive, which leads him to demean Ivan's attempts at mediation. Yet the narrative also suggests regret, indicating that the conflict is not simply personal cruelty but an inability to accept different positions. This tension between affection and intolerance contributes to the work's meaningful structure.

#### 2.2 Serge

Serge is a dermatologist and financially well-off. He shows appreciation for art, particularly modern art, and can be considered a nouveau riche figure displaying typical behaviors of this social group. His purchase therefore carries social meaning beyond aesthetics.

The purchase contains an element of ostentation and a desire for recognition within circles of collectors and galleries. Institutional validation (such as the possibility of resale through a gallery) is emphasized, linking taste to market recognition and cultural legitimacy. Serge also frames modern taste as belonging to one's time, presenting contemporaneity as a criterion of value.

The analysis notes that Serge later faces financial instability, yet he prioritizes acquiring the painting. This highlights how symbolic distinction and cultural capital can outweigh economic security, illustrating cultural goods as social investments.

### 2.3 Ivan

Ivan works in a stationery store and is soon to be married. His weak socio-economic position is presented as a major reason for diminished self-esteem and chronic indecision. He avoids taking firm sides because he fears judgment and wants to avoid upsetting others.

Although Ivan personally disagrees with spending such a large sum on the painting, he refuses to criticize Serge as harshly as Marc does. He maintains that people are free to choose as long as they do not harm one another. At the same time, his difficulty expressing personal opinions is connected to a long history of following others' demands, which weakens his ability to identify his own desires. The wedding invitation subplot deepens the sociological dimension: Ivan becomes caught between conflicting demands from his fiancée, father, and mother and cannot satisfy all expectations. This illustrates pressures of recognition and symbolic humiliation. Yet Ivan sometimes defends his own modest aesthetic choices, showing that cultural judgment can threaten personal dignity and social position.

## V. DISCUSSION

At the explanation level, the analysis links the play's objective meaning to social and cultural structures. One pillar of Goldmann's method is the transindividual subject: the work is created by a social subject rather than an isolated individual, so the transformation of society becomes an element in the transformation of the subject and vice versa. In this view, the writer gives imaginative form to what exists within a social group in a more implicit state.

The play is read as staging tensions between tradition and modernity and as an inquiry into freedom and choice within a postmodern context. The article emphasizes that modernity carries hope for the future, whereas postmodernism indicates disillusionment, and that postmodernism critiques modernity by revealing its contradictions. Within this frame, individuals may believe they freely choose tastes, while social conditions shape and constrain those choices.

The interpretation draws on socialization as a mechanism through which values and norms are internalized and behavior becomes self-regulating. It also emphasizes that taste is socially constructed: different tastes emerge in relation to social strata and statuses. Marc, Serge, and Ivan come from distinct socio-economic classes, which explains their differing tastes and preferences.

A key outcome is that acceptance of cultural activities depends on the social position of those engaging in them. Each class imitates the one above it while attempting to distinguish itself from the one below. In this light, Serge's expensive purchase functions as an attempt to align with upper-class cultural taste. The varying paintings in the characters' homes become visible signs of classed taste; the point is not to rank modern art above other styles, but to show how a dominant taste becomes a reference that others emulate to appear more affluent.

Finally, the play suggests that cultural products operate as media for social ranking and classification. Judgments about art become struggles over legitimacy, where privileged groups possess greater capacity to validate cultural activities and confer prestige. The conflict among friends shows how these broader structures enter everyday relationships and destabilize friendship.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Yasmina Reza's *Art* can be read, through Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism, as an aesthetic form of collective social consciousness. The conflict over a white modern painting condenses class-based struggles over cultural legitimacy and demonstrates how social class influences personal choices and cultural tastes. The character-based findings indicate that Marc's classical orientation, Serge's status-oriented

investment in modern art, and Ivan's precarious indecision are intelligible as products of differentiated socio-economic positions. Exploring these social and political dimensions can guide readers and theatre practitioners toward non-dramatic layers that matter for interpretation, adaptation, and performance.

Another significant aspect of Art is the complete absence of female characters from the stage. This absence is not merely incidental, but sociologically meaningful. The play constructs a homosocial space in which male friendship, rivalry, and symbolic power are negotiated without the presence of women. This exclusion reinforces the idea that cultural authority, aesthetic judgment, and social legitimacy are predominantly defined within a masculine framework. From a genetic structuralist perspective, this absence reflects a collective worldview in which male-centered discourse dominates cultural production and evaluation. Women remain structurally invisible, yet implicitly present as social references rather than active subjects. This reveals how power relations operate not only through what is shown on stage, but also through what is systematically omitted.

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