



READING NOËL COWARD'S CAVALCADE AS A PROBLEM PLAY

NOËL COWARD'IN RESMİGEÇİT* ESERİNİN BİR PROBLEM OYUNU OLARAK İNCELENMESİ

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Abstract

Sir Noël Peirce Coward (1899-1973) was a prolific English playwright, actor, director, writer, composer, songwriter, and screenwriter who produced numerous works of plays, musicals, songs, short stories, poetry and a novel. However, Coward is most admired for his drama. He is acknowledged to be a playwright of comedy of manners, musical comedy, and light comedy. The 1930s showed the peak of his theatrical success. Coward stages the realities of the twentieth-century life in Britain by means of intellectual, psychological, and witty discussion of the sociopolitical issues in everyday life. Although he is known for his comedies, he became successful with one of his noncomic plays, *Cavalcade* (1931). Coward reveals his sense of the theatre and his stagecraft in the play to thrill, distress and puzzle the audience. The play presents the changes in nation's spirit and society with the coming of the new age, which brings about domestic, social, political, economic, and moral problems for English people. It discusses such problems as the conflict between patriotism and jingoism, Englishness, futility of war, human cost of war, breakdown of the social class system, tension between the lower and upper classes, social mobility, modernisation in life and society, generation gap, maintenance of peace, honour and dignity, and political partisanship. Although the play presents conflicting opinions or situations at the same time, it does not suggest any formula to resolve the contradiction. In this respect, this article aims to analyse Coward's serious and realistic play as a problem play both in form and content by interpreting the historical events and topical sociopolitical issues of Coward's time.

Öz

Sir Noël Peirce Coward (1899-1973) çok sayıda tiyatro oyunu, müzikal, şarkı, kısa öykü, şiir ve bir roman eseri kazandıran üretken bir İngiliz oyun yazarı, aktör, yönetmen, yazar, besteci, söz yazarı ve senaristti. Ancak Coward en çok tiyatro oyunları ile takdir toplamıştır. Coward, töre komedisi, müzikal komedi ve hafif komedi yazarı olarak kabul edilmektedir. 1930'lu yıllar Coward'ın tiyatro başarısının zirvesi olmuştur. Gündelik hayattaki sosyopolitik meselelerin entelektüel, psikolojik ve esprili tartışmasıyla Britanya'da yirminci yüzyıl yaşamının gerçeklerini sahneye koymuştur. Oyun yazarı, her ne kadar komedileriyle tanınsa da komik olmayan oyunlarından biri olan *Resmigeçit* (1931) ile büyük başarı elde etmiştir. Seyirciyi heyecanlandırmak, endişelendirmek ve şaşırtmak için tiyatro anlayışını ve sahne sanatını oyunda ortaya koymuştur. Oyun, İngiliz halkına ailevi, toplumsal, siyasi, ekonomik ve ahlaki sorunları beraberinde getiren yeni çağın gelmesiyle birlikte ulus ruhunda ve toplumda meydana gelen değişimleri konu alır. Oyun, vatanseverlik ve aşırı milliyetçilik arasındaki çatışma, İngilizlik, savaşın beghudeliği, savaşın insan maliyeti, toplumsal sınıf sisteminin çöküşü, alt ve üst sınıflar arasındaki gerilim, toplumsal hareketlilik, yaşamda ve toplumda modernleşme, kuşak farkı, barışın, onurun ve haysiyetin korunması ve siyasi partizanlık gibi sorunları tartışmaktadır. Oyun, birbiriyle çatışan görüş veya durumları birlikte sunsa da çatışmayı çözecek bir formül önermez. Bu bağlamda bu makale, Coward'ın yaşadığı dönemin tarihsel olaylarını ve güncel sosyopolitik konularını yorumlayarak, onun ciddi ve gerçekçi oyununu hem biçim hem içerik bakımından bir problem oyunu olarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

* Noël Coward's *Cavalcade* was translated into Turkish as *Resmigeçit* by Avni Givda, and it was published by Milli Eğitim Basımevi in Istanbul in 1953.

Introduction

Sir Noël Peirce Coward (1899-1973) was a prolific English playwright, actor, director, writer, composer, songwriter, and screenwriter who produced numerous works of plays, musicals, songs, short stories, poetry and a novel. Although Noël Coward was underestimated by critics during his life, he was then acknowledged to be one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century (Brustein, 2009, p. viii; Wyrick, 1973, p. 4). Coward is referred to as “*the Master*” for his talents in different types of art and literature (Kiernan, 1986, p. 115). As Lord Louis Mountbatten stated at a party for Coward’s seventieth birthday in December 1969, “[t]here are probably greater painters than Noël, greater novelists than Noël, greater librettists, greater composers of music, greater singers, greater dancers, greater comedians, greater tragedians, greater stage producers, greater film directors, greater cabaret artists, greater TV stars”, adding that “[i]f there are, they are fourteen different people. Only one man combined all fourteen different labels – *The Master*” (as cited in Day, 2010, p. 3). However, Coward is most admired for his drama (Day, 2010, p. 35). By common consensus, Coward is acknowledged to be a playwright of comedy of manners, musical comedy, and light comedy (Kiernan, 1986, p. 93). He is known for being a man of “*wit and humor, energy and drive, talent and ambition*” (Morse, 1973, p. 47). The 1930s showed the peak of Coward’s theatrical success with such plays as *Private Lives* (1930), *Cavalcade* (1931), *Design for Living* (1932), and *Tonight at 8.30* (1935) (Day, 2010, p. 177). Using common speech, Coward stages the realities of the twentieth-century life in Britain by means of intellectual, psychological, and witty discussion of the sociopolitical issues in everyday life. Although he is known for his comedies, he became successful with one of his noncomic plays, *Cavalcade* (1931). The play presents the changes in nation’s spirit and society with the coming of the new age, which brings about domestic, social, political, economic, and moral problems for English people. In this respect, this article aims to analyse Coward’s serious and realistic play as a problem play both in form and content by interpreting the historical events and topical sociopolitical issues of Coward’s time.

The Problem Play

Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright and theatre director, is considered to be the founder of the problem play in the nineteenth-century drama, taking his materials from daily life and ordinary people in actual circumstances. Based upon William Archer’s claim, Richard F. Dietrich wrote that the term problem play was first used by Sydney Grundy (1989, p. 15). However, it is acknowledged that it was

Frederick Samuel Boas who introduced the term to group some of William Shakespeare's plays such as *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Hamlet* because of the difficulty to classify their dramatic genre as comedies or tragedies (Boas, 1896, p. 345; Clark, 2007, p. 10; Thomas, 1991, p. 2; Yachnin, 2003, p. 46). For Boas, who borrowed the term from the late nineteenth-century realistic stage representations of Ibsen, Johan August Strindberg and George Bernard Shaw, these plays of Shakespeare "introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilisation is ripe unto rottenness", generating "abnormal conditions of brain and of emotion" which then produce "intricate cases of conscience" that "demand a solution by unprecedented methods" (1896, p. 345). Boas also adds that "throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed [...] we are left to interpret their enigmas as best we may" (p. 345). That is, the audience, still thinking on the problems of the decadent societies discussed throughout Shakespeare's plays, cannot achieve any satisfactory resolution in the end.

William Witherle Lawrence in his *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* argues that the term problem play is used to refer to "productions which clearly do not fall into the category of tragedy, and yet are too serious and analytic to fit the commonly accepted conception of comedy" (1931, p. 5). According to Lawrence, the fundamental characteristic of a problem play is that "a perplexing and distressing complication in human life is presented in a spirit of high seriousness" (p. 4). In this way, "the theme" in the problem play "is handled so as to arouse not merely interest or excitement, or pity or amusement, but to probe the complicated interrelations of character and action, in a situation admitting of different ethical interpretations" (p. 4). The problem in these plays does not have any true or fixed solution or formula "since human life is too complex to be so neatly simplified" (p. 4). Lawrence emphasizes that the problem play is quite realistic, and problems in everyday life are presented as they exist (p. 7). Although the theme itself may develop out of popular or historical story and may still retain some unreasonableness, it is handled as a real human problem and is seriously discussed as such. As Lawrence also states, the problem plays deal with "the darker sides of life, and a deeper and more serious probing of its mysteries" (p. 206).

Studying Shakespeare's problem plays, Ernest Schanzer suggests that the problem play is "[a] play in which we find a concern with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so

that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible or even probable" (1963, p. 6). He argues that the problem play is not a separate dramatic genre which can be differentiated from Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies and history plays. It rather offers a peculiar way for the presentation of moral problems. However, Shakespeare's problem plays deal mostly with the psychological and spiritual problems of the society while the problem plays of the nineteenth century and onwards are mainly concerned with the sociopolitical problems of the modern society. The latter provides various commentaries on domestic, social, political, economic, and moral situations of the *fin de siècle* and twentieth century. As Shaw expresses, the problem play of the New Drama is "*the presentation in parable of the conflict between Man's will and his environment: in a word, of problem*" (1983, p. 197). He elucidates that the material of the problem playwright is "*some conflict of human feeling with circumstances; so that, since institutions are circumstances, every social question furnishes material for drama*" (1958, p. 59). Although the world of Shakespeare's problem plays is artificial, the world of the *fin-de-siècle* and twentieth-century problem plays is obviously realistic.

According to Shaw, Ibsen dramatized "*not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situations*" (1913, p. 202). In his plays, Ibsen criticises social evils which are acknowledged to be good enough not to talk about in society. Therefore, his plays frankly discuss the social problems and ills of his day in a conversational manner rather than a poetic one. Ibsen employed drama "*to ask questions rather than supply answers*" (McFarlane, 1961, p. 16), which is one of the basic characteristics of the problem plays. For him, the stage was a platform to discuss social and political issues of his time. His plays avoid sentimentality, catharsis and laughter but encourages intellectuality and rationality. Ibsen's plays influenced modern English plays when Edmund Gosse, William Archer and Shaw introduced Ibsen's plays to modern British drama (Singh, 1986, p. 48). Although English problem plays came out under foreign influence, they developed in their own dramatic traditions depending on the playwright's style and understanding. Such playwrights as Shaw, John Galsworthy and Harley Granville-Barker contributed to the spread of the exercise of the problem plays since modern English audience wanted a new drama which would show new models and new ideas different from those of Ibsen.

Problem plays in modern British drama emerged as a reaction against the melodramas of the Victorian middle class. They challenge the "*shoddy and showy side of the Victorian theatre*", dealing rather with the real and serious side of the *fin*

de siècle and twentieth century (Fraser, 1960, p. 127). Problem plays of the New Drama focus on “*the creation of a new society*” (Gassner, 1954, p. 383). They oppose romance, imagination and sentimentalism for the sake of wit, reason, intellect and reality. They express the real problems of the real people under real circumstances. They show the contemporary domestic, social, political, economic and moral questions and reveal the prevalent vices and ills within the society by urging the contemporary audience to think on the serious problems. Problems discussed mostly are the conflicts between youth and age, the traditional and modern, the old and new, labour and capital, and individual and society about sex, gender, politics and religion in broader sense as well as the conflicts about the relations between man and woman, husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, master and servant, and lower and upper classes in narrower sense.

Offering a criticism of everyday life, the problem plays stage the problematic possibilities in the real lives of ordinary people in commonplace circumstances. The language is less rhetorical and more in the words of common speech. Characters speak the language of their age and dialogues communicate the sociopolitical condition of their society. Characterization and setting are less extravagant and more realistic. Stage setting is also arranged in a way that reflects the conditions of the contemporary life. The stage appears as a drawing room or any everyday environment. By these means, realism in theatre provides an exact and objective representation of the problems of ordinary people in everyday life. The audience enjoy “*the physically real*” rather than the “*imaginatively true*” as William Bodham Donne declares (1858, p. 206). For this reason, the problem playwrights prefer the representation of what is within their reach. In this way, the problem plays offer a realistic investigation of human society and human consciousness. There are usually no good or bad characters in problem plays. Characters are rather perplexed by the sociopolitical machinery that includes historical events, institutions and organisations.

Problem plays are engaged in more problems than solutions in terms of form and content. As Nicholas Marsh points out, “[w]hether [problem plays] highlight a tension between content and form, or between disparate elements of content, they reflect an experience of plays which are not solved: not susceptible to, or provided with, a unified and stable resolution” (2003, p. 271). In addition, Ira G. Clark also emphasizes that “*the problem plays’ meddling with generic horizons of expectation, their dark and troubled tone, their presentation of difficult—even intractable—personal,*

sexual, economic, and sociopolitical issues intensify the response well beyond what we anticipate in most literature and literary analyses” (2007, p. 123). Within this framework, this article tries to examine Coward’s *Cavalcade* as a twentieth-century problem play by exploring the historical events and topical sociopolitical issues of Coward’s time.

***Cavalcade* as a Problem Play**

Cavalcade, premiered at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in London on 13 October 1931, is set in between New Year’s Eve 1899 and New Year’s Eve 1930. Presenting Coward’s own life from his birth to the age of thirty, the play stages the sociopolitical environment of the thirty years through some important events of English history. It dramatizes the historical events of the three decades through the changing lives of two families from two different social classes: the Marryots, a middle-class family, and the Bridges, a lower-class family servant to the Marryots. Coinciding with Britain’s abandonment of the gold standard, the play deals with the Boer War, relief of the British troops at Mafeking, the funeral of Queen Victoria, the sinking of the Titanic, the outbreak of the First World War, the Great Depression, and the post-war society of 1920s. The play shows with these fragments of historical events that the turn of the century witnessed dramatic changes in every aspect of life including society, politics, economics, arts, science, and technology. Crucial events of the end of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century are presented in a realistic manner in the play. There is no rule for the division of the play into acts and scenes as the play consists of three parts and twenty-one scenes of different length. The play is constructed of long stage directions, mime and various songs. The members of these two families are ordinary people, they engage in conversation with simple dialogues, and they are portrayed in a realistic manner. In this respect, the play appeals to “*the Backbone of England*” (Fisher, 1992, p. 105). Actions take place in everyday environments such as the drawing room, kitchen, street, park, theatre, restaurant, railway station of London, and Trafalgar Square.

Cavalcade is considered one of Coward’s most popular and most spectacular plays (Baldick, 2004, p. 133; Lesley, Payn, & Morley, 1979, p. 87). Coward reveals his sense of the theatre and his stagecraft in the play to thrill, distress and puzzle the audience. The first problem of the play lies in the question of its genre. Literary critics and scholars feel uncomfortable with labelling the play according to traditional generic conventions. It is seen that Coward did not write his play in accordance with any prescriptions, which caused the audience of his time to question his skills. His

transgression of the traditional generic conventions allowed him to produce *Cavalcade* as a problem play that assumes irresolution and complexity. The play is also filled with unresolvable contradictions in terms of content. Coward puts domestic, social, political, economic and moral problems of his age before his audience and compels them “*to feel as well as think about them*” (Blamires, 1974, p. 395). That is, the playwright uses the stage as a platform to urge English people to contemplate the causes and effects of the sociopolitical issues.

Cavalcade displays “*the contradiction between effort and capacity, between will and possibility, the tragedy, and, at the same time, comedy of the individual and of mankind*” (Singh, 1986, p. 92). Arousing excitement, anxiety and contemplation in the audience, the play is described as “*a spectacle, a pageant, or an extravaganza*” (Morse, 1973, p. 40). The play can be regarded as “*a historical pageant of Britain in modern times*” as it is mainly concerned with historical events and sociopolitical issues which conflict and trouble English society for a long time (Baldick, 2004, p. 133). In other words, as Patrick Braybrooke states, “*history [is] acted, history [is] sung and history [is] sobbed*” in the play (1933, p. 148). In this way, Coward enables the audience of his time to remember the realities of their lives and to think over their sociopolitical situations. Frances Gray explains that these historical events were “*the things people wanted to remember, conditioned by the popular dailies to see the most important events of the past thirty years as being those which served to unite the nation rather than divide it against itself*” (1987, p. 71). Although the play intends that these historical events would bring all English people together, it inversely shows that these events have brought about several sociopolitical problems in England.

Various problems dominate the play, such as the conflict between patriotism and jingoism, Englishness, futility of war, human cost of war, breakdown of the social class system, tension between the lower and upper classes, social mobility, modernisation in life and society, generation gap, maintenance of peace, honour and dignity, and political partisanship. Coward presents these problems through realistic characterisation, dialogues and setting. The play reflects sociopolitical life accurately as a perfect mirror of the age since the public in Coward’s time wanted true-to-life representation in the theatre (Day, 2010, p. 7). That is why the play is more realistic than escapist and invites the audience to face the contemporary sociopolitical problems. His ironic exposition of a sociopolitical situation ends with a question rather than an answer. That is, the play presents conflicting opinions or situations at the same time, but it does not suggest any formula to resolve the contradiction.

Cavalcade opens in the drawing room of the Marryots on December 31, 1899, when Ellen and Alfred Bridges prepare for the New Year's Eve celebration. As they set the table for the Marryots, they talk about Alfred's going to the South African front for the Boer War. When Ellen questions what the war is for, claiming that "[n]obody wanted to 'ave a war", Alfred answers that "[w]e've got to 'ave wars every now and then to prove we're top-dog" (Coward, 1942, p. 546). Alfred's response brings out two of the problems in the play in terms of content: the conflict between patriotism and jingoism and focus on Englishness. While *Cavalcade* is regarded as a "patriotic" play on the one hand (Fisher, 1992, p. 105; Jackson, 2022, p. 56; Kiernan, 1986, p. 14; Lahr, 1982, p. 3; Morley, 2016, p. 223), it is also seen as a jingoistic play on the other hand (Hoare, 1998, p. 233; Mannin, 1932, p. 7; O'Casey, 1994, p. 89). Alfred asserts his patriotic stance by believing that British soldiers "are suffering out there in darkest Africa, giving their life's blood for their Queen and country" (Coward, 1942, p. 546). However, his justification of the war is far from being patriotic as he insists that "if we didn't go out and give them Boers wot for, they'd be over 'ere wreakin' 'avoc" (p. 546).

Coward was influenced by some photographs of British troops departing for the Boer War in the *Illustrated London News*, a magazine that depicted world events from patriotic perspective, which led him to create a story of British heroism (Coward, 1937, p. 398). British soldiers were sent off effusively as if British Empire "was part of some grand design for the benefit of humanity" (Gray, 1987, p. 70). What British Empire intended was to colonize the Transvaal Republic for its rich gold mines (Hobson, 1900). That Alfred assumes the Boers disturb England's peace and dignity indicates his jingoistic stance through his "immature and ignorant insistence on the righteousness of [his] own country, no matter what—[his] country [is] right or wrong" (Antony, 2003, p. 379). When Robert and Jane Marryot enter the scene, they also talk about Robert's going to the Boer war. Unlike Robert and Alfred, Ellen and Jane are not so interested in the war. They are rather concerned about the lives of their men and safety of their children. Although Robert thinks that the war "can't last more than a few months" (Coward, 1942, p. 548), it lasts for more than he predicts, which gradually makes Jane hysterical. Robert and Alfred could return eight months after the relief of Mafeking. Mrs. Snapper, who is Ellen's mother, and Cook wonder if Alfred will really return safe and sound, without losing any part of his body. So "a great air of tension and excitement" fills the kitchen "while Ellen's and Bridges' legs appear down the area steps" of the cab (p. 560). It is obvious that contradictions between the dark realities of the war for both soldiers in the front line and families and friends left

behind and the rhetoric of patriotism and Englishness suggest unresolved issues in the play in aspects of the futility of war and human cost of war.

While the Bridges celebrate Alfred's return from South Africa, they learn from the newspaper the death of Queen Victoria. The Marryots and Bridges are all in black for the funeral of the Queen. As they watch the funeral procession on the balcony, Jane says "*I feel listless and sad, as though her death were a personal grief*" (Coward, 1942, p. 563). Affecting deeply English people, the death of Queen Victoria means the close of an era in historical and sociopolitical terms. That is, her death indicates transition from the old to the new age and from the traditional to the modern. When Joe, the younger son of the Marryots, questions the reason why the Queen died, Jane answers "*[b]ecause she was a very old lady, and very tired*" (p. 563). Jane's reply to his son's question implies that Victorian values and traditions of the nineteenth century become obsolete in the twentieth century. Thus, the playwright suggests that Victorian values and traditions have also made people tired and there is a need for a change in the new century. In this respect, Coward celebrates traditional Victorian values on the one hand, but he also welcomes modernity in life and society on the other hand, which poses several problems in the play.

As the new century comes, the audience realizes that the lives of the two families begin to change. With the turn of the century, the Bridges decide to leave domestic service to the Marryots and open a pub, climbing up the ladder in socio-economic sense. Ellen learns to play the piano for the customers in the pub and Fanny, her daughter, learns to dance, which is a popular way of Edwardian entertainment. When Jane and Edward, the elder son of the Marryots, visit the Bridges in their place one day, they see Alfred "*unkempt and unshaven, and is obviously drunk*" (Coward, 1942, p. 567). The audience recognizes that the more elegant and educated Ellen and Fanny become the more desperate and ruder Alfred becomes, losing his interest in his family and society. He throws the doll that Jane has bought for Fanny into the fire as he thinks of it "*bloody charity*" (p. 568). Alfred's attitudes towards his family and the Marryots signify the tension between the lower and upper classes in post-Victorian England. This tension makes Ellen believe that "*[t]ime changes many things—*" either in positive or negative way (p. 568). This scene is problematic in that social mobility does not benefit everyone since Alfred cannot identify with his new social class after he quits the role of servant.

Coward inverts traditionally accepted Victorian bourgeoisie. In the play, Victorian ideals are deflated, and they are replaced by the realities of the modern society. The play refers to the Victorian era as “*a time of unexampled prosperity and harmony*” whereas modern times as “*mean and unsettled*” (Fisher, 1992, pp. 108-109). That Joe asks Connie, a married woman, in a community of friends at a restaurant to marry him shows the moral degeneration in the post-Victorian society. In this sense, the play presents old and new values and lifestyles in tension. The contradiction between the two periods also leads to a generation gap. Edward and Edith, his childhood friend, get married and they go on a honeymoon on an Atlantic liner, which the audience see at the end of the scene that it is S. S. Titanic. While they speculate on how happy they will be, Edith claims that their generation is different because their parents “*had a better chance at the beginning. Things weren’t changing so swiftly; life wasn’t so restless*” (Coward, 1942, p. 577). Just like Ellen’s emphasis on changing time, Edith’s reply reveals the dark and ironical aspect of the change of time. The play also rejects sentimentality with the sinking of S. S. Titanic since some emotions such as love, romance and sexual passion are denied in the problem plays (Henderson, 1956, p. 761). In this respect, Coward’s play exhibits “*not voluptuous reverie but intellectual interest, not romantic rhapsody but human concern*” in Shaw’s words (1983, p. 196).

The following scene informs the audience about the outbreak of World War I. While British people still bear the financial and emotional burden of the Boer War, they now go to the Great War. Alfred’s false patriotism is reflected in Robert and Joe this time. While Robert “*drink[s] to the downfall of Germany in their own damned wine*”, believing that Germany, Russia, France, Italy and America cannot afford the cost of the war as much as Britain and that they will win (Coward, 1942, p. 579), Joe wants to join the army as he finds the war “*terribly exciting*” (p. 580). Contrary to her husband and son, Jane exhibits anti-war attitude, uttering the vanity of war: “*Drink to the war, then, if you want to. I’m not going to. I can’t! Rule Britannia! Send us victorious, happy and glorious! Drink [...] to Victory and Defeat, and stupid, tragic sorrow. But leave me out of it, please!*” (p. 581). Just as Ellen questions the necessity of the Boer War at the beginning of the play, Jane expresses the futility of the Great War in this scene, finding the war stupid and tragic. However, the play does not touch on what has happened during the Great War as the scene jumps from 1914 to 1918 with the vision of soldiers incessantly marching “*[o]ut of darkness into darkness*” sometimes silently, sometimes singing gay songs, and sometimes whistling (p. 581),

which can be considered as an attempt to hide the dark and tragic realities of the war.

In the next scene, set in October 1918, the audience witnesses the romance between Joe and Fanny. Joe, in officer's uniform, is ready to go to war and says farewell to Fanny. This scene shows the tension of their relationship when Fanny states that she loves Joe enough to marry him but she would not because "*[i]t would be too difficult. [They] shouldn't be happy married. [His] Mother wouldn't like it*" (Coward, 1942, p. 582). The reason why Jane would not like their marriage is revealed in another scene in which Ellen visits Jane after Joe leaves for the war. Looking "*very well dressed, almost smart*", Ellen goes to Jane, who "*is dressed in street clothes*", which refers to the changing lives of the two families (p. 584). Whereas Jane does not approve of their marriage due to the social class distinction between the two families, Ellen argues that "*Fanny's at the top of the tree now*" (p. 586) with "*all the best people*" around her (p. 585), indicating Fanny's social climbing. Fanny represents change in society once she, as the maid's daughter, has broken through the class system by her artistic skill. Although she is the daughter of the Bridges, she does not want to be a servant like her parents but becomes a well-known and well-paid singer. Jane believes that disruption of the status quo in the new age is still dangerous. Reacting to their old class roles, Ellen replies to Jane that "*[t]hings aren't what they used to be [...] it's all changing*", referring to the pointlessness of adherence to the Victorian status quo (p. 586). While they continue to discuss on the problem of marriage, Jane gets a telegram from the battlefield which says that Joe is dead just before the end of the war. This scene parallels the S. S. Titanic scene in which the audience recognizes that Edward and Edith would drown in the North Atlantic Ocean, ending their sentimental relationship. Therefore, this scene also rejects love between Joe and Fanny with Joe's death on the front line because there is no place for sentimentality, romance and passion in the problem plays as such emotions are "*the most unoriginative, uncreative faculty in the world*" (Shaw, 1907, p. 148). In this way, the marriage which Jane disapproves yet Ellen approves remains an unresolved problem in the play.

Coward goes on putting sociopolitical developments and human suffering, or private grief, in tension. English people celebrate their victory against Germany with the Armistice of 11 November 1918 at Trafalgar Square. In this scene, the audience sees Jane with her clothes looking messy and her face "*dead white and quite devoid of expression*" (Coward, 1942, p. 586). Although she stands there "*cheering wildly*"

like other cheering and yelling people, she also sheds tears for her loss “*occasionally brandishing the rattle and blowing the squeaker*” (p. 587). This scene reveals the differences between the dark realities of war for both soldiers on the battlefield and families and friends left behind and the glorious rhetoric of nationalism, patriotism and glory, which remains unresolved throughout the play.

The play does not stage what has happened after the end of the Great War as the scene jumps from November 11th, 1918, to December 31st, 1929. It is the New Year’s Eve of 1930, and Jane appears with white hair and is in black. The scene in which Jane toasts to the new year is one of the most significant scenes in the play:

Now, then, let’s couple the Future of England with the past of England. The glories and victories and triumphs that are over, and the sorrows that are over, too. Let’s drink to our sons who made part of the pattern and to our hearts that died with them. Let’s drink to the spirit of gallantry and courage that made a strange Heaven out of unbelievable Hell, and let’s drink to the hope that one day this country of ours, which we love so much, will find dignity and greatness and peace again (Coward, 1942, p. 589).

In her toast, Jane wishes to couple the Future of England with the past of England, the glories of her nation with her sorrows, and Hell with Heaven for a more dignified, greater, and more peaceful country. However, her wish is full of problematic sociopolitical issues questioned but left unresolved throughout the play, such as the futility of wars, the human cost of wars, false ideals, breakdown of the social class system, tension between the lower and upper classes, social mobility, contradiction between adherence to traditions and embrace of transformation, and domestic misery and suffering wrought by the government. Jane’s toast also poses another problem in that neither the playwright himself and the characters nor the audience know how England’s past and future might be connected and how sorrows and triumphs might be harmonised so that the country would find dignity, greatness and peace again. The fair appearances of Boer War, World War I, Great Depression and other controversial sociopolitical events contradict with the bad reality beneath them, producing a paradox between appearance and reality, or seeming and being. Thus, “[a]ll the firm points of view [...] are felt to be fallible” in the play (Rossiter, 1961, p. 128). In this respect, *Cavalcade* is concerned with the relationship between people and institutions, interrogating “*authority, hierarchy, decision-making and the consequence of these decisions for the society as a whole and for particular individuals*”

(Thomas, 1991, p. 15). Therefore, the rupture between the official rhetoric and social reality creates some major problems in the play.

Jane's toast is followed by a scene in a night club, in which Fanny plays the piano and sings "Twentieth Century Blues":

Verse

*Why is it that civilised humanity
Must make the world so wrong?
In this hurly burly of insanity
Your dreams cannot last long.
We've reached a headline—
The Press headline—every sorrow,
Blues value is News value tomorrow.*

Refrain

*Blues, Twentieth Century Blues, are getting me down.
Who's escaped those weary Twentieth Century Blues?
Why, if there's a God in the sky, why shouldn't he grin?
High above this dreary Twentieth Century din,
In this strange illusion,
Chaos and confusion,
People seem to lose their way.
What is there to strive for,
Love or keep alive for? Say—
Hey, hey, call it a day.
Blues, nothing to win or to lose.
It's getting me down.
Blues, I've got those weary Twentieth Century Blues (Coward, 1942,
pp. 589-590; emphasis in original).*

Although the play does not touch on what has happened after the end of the First World War as the scene jumps from November 11th, 1918, to December 31st, 1929, the audience is given some clues about the post-war era of the 1920s with Fanny's song. Conveying "*discordance*" and "*curious hectic desperation*" (as cited in Day, 2010, p. 177), the song reveals the anxiety and existential problems of a disillusioned British society and a disjointed country in the "*weary*" and "*dreary*" twentieth century (Coward, 1942, p. 590). The audience recognizes that the twenties were difficult and tiresome for English people because "*civilised humanity*" brought about fallaciousness, insanity, disappointment, and sorrow (p. 589). Due to the financial and emotional burden of the Great War, people lost their ways and faith in

God and felt confused in illusion and chaos, questioning if there was anything to strive for, love or keep alive for. By setting the tumultuous times off-stage, Coward makes the audience discuss England's progress in historical and sociopolitical contexts, putting forth the problem with national identity but not resolving it. Fanny's singing such a bleak song also reveals the post-war frustration of the youth with lavish nationalistic ideals and the despair, dissatisfaction and disillusionment young English people feel for their country and society. In this sense, the play conveys "a message to the youth of the nation" as Coward also makes the young audience think on England's unresolvable problems in the twentieth century (Coward, 1937, p. 353).

The play ends with a national solidarity when the Union Jack flies over on stage in the darkness and with a loyalty to the sovereign as the entire company of players sing the national anthem "God Save the King". That chaos of sounds and visions and national faith are placed side by side at the end of the play poses another problem. As Kiernan points out, "[a]re we to understand that faith in king and country can withstand the 'twentieth-century blues'? That such faith triumphs over chaos?" (1986, p. 120). At this point, there is a contradiction between the form and content of the play. Although the ending of the play seems to fulfil the audience expectations at a formal level, it frustrates the audience in terms of the content. In other words, the play cannot completely achieve "to produce the pleasure audiences expect from comedies [...] or the cathartic sadness they expect from tragedies" (Margolies, 2012, p. 3). Taking the progress of the play into consideration, its ending produces both positive and negative responses at the same time. Nevertheless, the avoidance of pleasure, laughter and catharsis throughout the play makes *Cavalcade* a successful problem play.

The closing scene of the play brings out another problem about the playwright's political partisanship. The play premiered days before the general election in the United Kingdom in 1931, in which Conservative National Government won. Many of the left-wing critics claimed that Coward tried to influence electorates by conservatism in the play (Fisher, 1992, p. 106; Lesley et al., 1979, p. 88). The playwright denied the claim by stating that he did not follow political developments while producing his play, but he was aware of the popular political mood in people (Coward, 1937, p. 415). When the entire royal family, including King George V and Queen Mary, attended a performance at Drury Lane shortly after the play opened, claims about the play's conservatism seemed right. The royal attendance was stated to create "an outburst of loyalty, a welling up of love for England and faith in English

destiny such as has rarely moved and quickened the heart of London since the War” (as cited in Lesley et al., 1979, p. 91). It was also rumoured that Coward would be knighted that evening (Fisher, 1992, p. 109).

Conclusion

This article has explored *Cavalcade*, one of Noël Coward’s most successful plays, as a twentieth-century problem play with its serious and realistic tone. Focusing on the changing lives of two families from two different social classes—the Marryots, a middle-class family, and the Bridges, a lower-class family servant to the Marryots—in the light of historical events and topical sociopolitical issues, Coward dramatizes the three decades of changes in nation’s spirit and society with the coming of the new age, which cause domestic, social, political, economic and moral problems for English people. Discussing the conflict between patriotism and jingoism, Englishness, futility of war, human cost of war, breakdown of the social class system, tension between the lower and upper classes, social mobility, modernisation in life and society, generation gap, maintenance of peace, honour and dignity, and political partisanship, *Cavalcade* demands the audience to question the actions and motives of the characters in the face of their experiences with the historical events and domestic, sociopolitical, economic and moral issues of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century. The response of the audience to the characters under the shadow of the controversial events and situations is complicated. The audience approves and accepts them on the one hand yet opposes and rejects them on the other hand.

Staging what constituted England, which was prepared by Queen Victoria but was transformed with the new age, the play mixes modes and genres to create uncertainty and discomfort and to trouble the audience long after. In the play, Coward presents conflicting issues, but does not suggest any formula to resolve any contradiction. While Coward shows the simple social, political, economic and moral frame so that British society can continue to function on the one hand, he also reveals how politics and society really work, which is more complex than what it appears to be. Different viewpoints on the domestic, social, political, economic and moral problems are discussed in the plot in opposition with each other. However, the audience is left with no solution or recovery in the end.

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Summary

Sir Noël Peirce Coward (1899-1973) was a prolific English playwright, actor, director, writer, composer, songwriter, and screenwriter who produced numerous works of plays, musicals, songs, short stories, poetry and a novel. However, Coward is most admired for his drama. He is acknowledged to be a playwright of comedy of manners, musical comedy, and light comedy. Although Noël Coward was underestimated by critics during his life, he was then acknowledged to be one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century. The 1930s showed the peak of Coward's theatrical success with such plays as *Private Lives* (1930), *Cavalcade* (1931), *Design for Living* (1932), and *Tonight at 8.30* (1935). Coward stages the realities of the twentieth-century life in Britain by means of intellectual, psychological, and witty discussion of the sociopolitical issues in everyday life. Although he is known for his comedies, he became successful with one of his noncomic plays, *Cavalcade* (1931). Coward reveals his sense of the theatre and his stagecraft in the play to thrill, distress and puzzle the audience. The play presents the changes in nation's spirit and society with the coming of the new age, which brings about domestic, social, political, economic, and moral problems for English people. Although the play presents conflicting opinions or situations at the same time, it does not suggest any formula to resolve the contradiction. In this respect, this article aims to analyse Coward's serious and realistic play as a problem play both in form and content by interpreting the historical events and topical sociopolitical issues of Coward's time.

Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright and theatre director, is considered to be the founder of the problem play in the nineteenth-century drama, taking his materials from daily life and ordinary people in actual circumstances. However, it is acknowledged that it was Frederick Samuel Boas who introduced the term to group some of William Shakespeare's plays such as *Troilus and Cressida, Measure for Measure, All's Well That Ends Well, and Hamlet* because of the difficulty to classify their dramatic genre as comedies or tragedies. Whereas Shakespeare's problem plays deal mostly with the psychological and spiritual problems of the society, the problem plays of the nineteenth century and onwards are mainly concerned with the sociopolitical problems of the modern society. The latter provides various commentaries on domestic, social, political, economic and moral situations of the *fin de siècle*

and twentieth century. Although the world of Shakespeare's problem plays is artificial, the world of the *fin-de-siècle* and twentieth-century problem plays is obviously realistic.

Ibsen's plays influenced modern English plays when Edmund Gosse, William Archer and George Bernard Shaw introduced Ibsen's plays to modern British drama. Although English problem plays came out under foreign influence, they developed in their own dramatic traditions depending on the playwright's style and understanding. Such playwrights as Shaw, John Galsworthy and Harley Granville-Barker contributed to the spread of the exercise of the problem plays since modern English audience wanted a new drama which would show new models and new ideas different from those of Ibsen. Problem plays in modern British drama emerged as a reaction against the melodramas of the Victorian middle class. They oppose romance, imagination and sentimentalism for the sake of wit, reason, intellect and reality. They express the real problems of the real people under real circumstances. They show the contemporary domestic, social, political, economic and moral questions and reveal the prevalent vices and ills within the society by urging the contemporary audience to think on the serious problems. Problems discussed mostly are the conflicts between youth and age, the traditional and modern, the old and new, labour and capital, and individual and society about sex, gender, politics and religion in broader sense as well as the conflicts about the relations between man and woman, husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, master and servant, and lower and upper classes in narrower sense.

Cavalcade is set in between New Year's Eve 1899 and New Year's Eve 1930. Presenting Coward's own life from his birth to the age of thirty, the play stages the sociopolitical environment of the thirty years through some important events of English history. It dramatizes the historical events of the three decades through the changing lives of two families from two different social classes: the Marryots, a middle-class family, and the Bridges, a lower-class family servant to the Marryots. Coinciding with Britain's abandonment of the gold standard, the play deals with the Boer War, relief of the British troops at Mafeking, the funeral of Queen Victoria, the sinking of the Titanic, the outbreak of the First World War, the Great Depression, and the post-war society of 1920s. Crucial events of the end of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century are presented in a realistic manner in the play. Although the play intends that these historical events would bring all English people together, it inversely shows that these events have brought about several sociopolitical problems in England. It discusses such problems as the conflict between patriotism and jingoism, Englishness, futility of war, human cost of war, breakdown of the social class system, tension between the lower and upper classes, social mobility, modernisation in life and society, generation gap, maintenance of peace, honour and dignity, and political partisanship.

Cavalcade demands the audience to question the actions and motives of the characters in the face of their experiences with the historical events and domestic, sociopolitical, economic, and moral issues of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century. The response of the audience to the characters under the shadow of the controversial events and situations is complicated. While Coward shows the simple social, political, economic and moral frame so that British society can continue to function on the one hand, he also reveals how politics and society really work, which is more complex than what it appears to be. Different viewpoints on the domestic, social, political, economic, and moral problems are discussed in the plot in opposition with each other. However, the audience is left with no solution or recovery in the end.