

Keeping up
appearances at all
costs mr. nilson and
the japanese quince



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Prof. Parker English 11102 5 December 2006 Keeping Up Appearances At All Costs - Mr. Nilson and The Japanese Quince In the short story, 'The Japanese Quince', by John Galsworthy, first published in 1910, Mr Nilson tells the story, he is the omniscient character, setting the tone as he rises one morning, feeling not quite well, in the luxury of his wealthy home, on a fine morning. He was conscious of his looks, his place in society and of behaving the 'right' way. The quince tree and the blackbird seemed to be metaphors for what life could be like for Mr. Nilson and his neighbour, if only these 'rules' could be changed, if only they could take a chance. The bird and the tree were fully alive, truly natural; Mr. Nilson merely existed - going through the motions behind the faade of a wealthy businessman. Appearances had to be maintained, even if this resulted in a lonely life and missed opportunities for friendship. The main problem with Mr. Nilson is his inability to break away from what he saw as the rules and strictures of polite Victorian society and make contact with another human being.

He was a rich, London businessman, living in wealthy surroundings, a man who took care of his health and appearance. He was a creature of habit, leading an orderly life, which made him feel secure, even as he suffered some physical discomfort. His neighbour, Mr. Tandram seemed his exact replica, as in " well known in the City" and " of about Mr. Nilson's own height, with firm, well-coloured cheeks, neat brown mustaches, and round, well-opened, clear grey eyes, and he was wearing a black frock coat."

(Galsworthy) How he looked to others was important for Nilson. The similarities run right through the story, ending in sadness for two lonely people who could have connected, if only they had not been so conventional, so concerned with how things looked, and with keeping up outside
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appearances.

It was the tree, the blackbird and the beauty of the day that combined to touch their separate emotions and bring them together for a short time, to forget themselves. In fact, talking about the tree almost brought Mr. Nilson out of his buttoned-up, socially restricted way of behaving. He thought, "Nice fellow this, I rather like him." (Galsworthy), even though he had not spoken to him for five years, due to being married! This is difficult to understand in modern society, but this was Victorian London; Mr. Nilson was unable to flout convention.

The personification of the tree - "... the little tree, as if appreciating their attention, glowed." (Galsworthy), suggested that the two lonely men were experiencing similar emotions to the tree and to each other and that, for a little while, their barriers came down and they made a connection. The image of the black-coated men contrasted dramatically with that of the Japanese quince. But of course, the whole interaction was destroyed by the realization, or perception, that both looked foolish. That would not do at all, it seemed a loss of position, a loss of face, So no matter how much pleasure Mr. Nilson took from this unusual social exchange with a man so like himself, he very soon realized this was 'not quite the right thing'. Because Nilson recognized himself in his neighbour, and considered him foolish to stand there discussing trees and birdsong, he felt foolish.

Their similarities, and the way in which the writer describes both men, emphasizes that they both had the same thoughts at the same moment. So they both withdrew, to the safety of their big houses, and the polite rules of Victorian society. Nilson had for a short time, enjoyed communicating with a 'kindred spirit', admiring nature and its beauty, almost breaking the 'rules'.
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He experienced once more, that earlier, " queer sensation, that choky feeling in his throat" (Galsworthy), as he stood looking out of the window; it seemed Mr. Tandram felt the same. They were married men, they had not been properly introduced, they dared not take matters any further without following the rules. But Mr. Nilson sacrificed the opportunity of a good friendship so as not to appear foolish, and to abide by those rules. This was his problem, that inability to break away from what strict Victorian society demanded, and so he missed the opportunity to make contact with Mr. Tandram, another human being just like himself.

Works Cited

Galsworthy, John, 1910. The Japanese Quince

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