

SOCIAL CLASS IN JOHN GALSWORTHY'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

English novelist and Nobel Prize winner John Galsworthy is best known for his literary series The Forsyte Saga, his portrayal of the British upper classes, and his treatments of social values. Also a dramatist, his reputation in his lifetime was second only to that of George Bernard Shaw. Through his plays, Galsworthy was a compassionate reformer who campaigned against long prison terms, harsh treatment of prisoners, class discrimination at the bar of justice, anti-Semitism, the intransigence of capitalists and labour union leaders, and other evils of society. His most esteemed plays are noted for their realistic technique and insightful social criticism. While working for his father, Galsworthy collected rents from the tenants of London slum properties, and several of his plays examine the contrast between the rights of the privileged upper classes and the poor. Galsworthy was also a successful dramatist, his plays, written in a naturalistic style, usually examining some controversial ethical or social problem. They include 'The Silver Box (1906)', which, like many of his other works, has a legal theme and depicts a bitter contrast of the law's treatment of the rich and the poor; Strife (1909), a study of industrial relations; Justice (1910), a realistic portrayal of prison life that roused so much feeling that it led to reform; and Loyalties (1922), the best of his later plays. In The Silver Box, for example, the son of a wealthy member of Parliament steals a purse from a prostitute. Later, the husband of one of the family's servants steals a cigarette box from the purse. While the wealthy young man is released, the servant's husband is convicted and sent to prison.

Keywords : John Galsworthy, british upper class, reformer, class discrimination, naturalistic style etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Galsworthy portrayed traditional English values, such as love of the countryside, fair play, integrity in business and other worldly affairs, devotion to justice, respect for women, harmony between the sexes, honourable behaviour, support for the underdog, and the Victorian/Edwardian code of the gentleman and lady. Many of the books and stories included in "The Forsyte Saga" reflect these values as do such books as "The Country House".

Social class distinctions are an important part of Galsworthy's history and a major feature in his works : where two classes are in opposition. What are the characteristics of each class? What is the core argument? Which "side" do you see more clearly represented in Galsworthy's writing? What characteristics of the class are evident in his satire?

The author deals with contemporary social problems. He is critical of injustice, tyranny and all the evils of life, but his criticism is not destructive: he himself was too much a member of the privileged classes to wish to rebuild the world he lived in. His characters are mostly of the upper middle class and the aristocracy with which he was wholly familiar. His plays deal with burning problems of contemporary life. The author describes the hard life of workers ("Strife"), attacks cruel regime in English prisons ("Justice"), expresses his indignation towards wars ("The Mob"), rejects the colonial policy of British imperialism ("The Forest"), and presents some other aspects of capitalist evils and injustice. Galsworthy's plays were very popular, but it is thanks to "The Forsyte Saga" he became one of the greatest figures in the world literature.

Strife centers on the conflict between labor and capital, it encompasses the socio-economic life of working-class women. The predicament of the women in the wake of the strike has been brought into full focus and calls for their redemption not only from the fetters of starvation but also from the domination of men. Coats justly points out that, *"On the side of the workers, the women and children are enduring the greatest privations through cold and hunger, for the winter has been exceptionally severe.(1)"*

Equally severe have been the striking men on their families. In this situation the struggle of labor and capital takes the form of a conflict between their two representatives, John Anthony and David Roberts. In the very nature of social drama, there is a suggestion for the redress of social problem and the amelioration of social conditions. For social dramas are meant to depict topical problems and as such a zealous reformative spirit thus informs them. In this play Galsworthy has tried to achieve the impossible and he has succeeded as much as in the nature of the impossible task allowed him.

David Roberts stands for the dominant position of men vis-à-vis women in society. He is with John Anthony, Chairman of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works, but also in his family life. David Roberts is quite stubborn man. His attitude towards his wife is not to be appreciated. Even when she pleads with him to compromise for the sake of the “women” and “children” who are suffering due to the elongated strike, he brushes her arguments aside brusquely:

“If they will go breeding themselves for slaves, without a thought O’ the future o’ then they breed . . (8).”

Howsoever right he may be in his arguments, the fact remains that he is unyielding and unaccommodating even when there are reasonable and ample grounds. In spite of his wife’s serious illness, he does not allow her to accept genuine help through little gifts from her former mistress Enid. He does not even allow her to work so that he could help out in the household economy. According to Roberts,

“This is not women’s work.(9)”

With a flash of malice Mrs. Roberts says ,

“No, the women may die for all you care. That’s their work.(10)”

This is Mrs. Roberts mild assertion of herself in the face of Robert’s damn- care attitude towards his ailing wife. Without the slightest of the regard for his wife’s delicate health he remarks,

“Who talks of dying? No one will die till we have beaten these ‘’’’(11)

It is true that Roberts does not come across as a cruel and tyrannical husband but he is by all means a domineering one. Mrs. Roberts is a loving and loyal wife. Although she longs to have children, she keeps her opinion to herself, knowing Roberts’ views about it. She tries her best to justify her domineering husband’s behaviour. But Roberts is not so considering. He neglects his wife even when she is gravely ill. He deprives her of motherhood and enforces strict economy in the household. He does not even allow his wife to take any help from her former mistress who his genuinely worried about Mrs. Robert’s declining health. She ultimately pays the price by her own death.

She dies due to her husband’s stubborn and uncompromising attitude.

Galsworthy maintains that women must have their way and say. They are not merely “breeders” . They are men’s best companion. They have a certain place in society and should get due recognition.

Women are not heard simply because they depend on men for all their needs, even for their bread. It is only the stubbornness of Roberts but also the economic and emotional dependence of Mrs. Roberts which leads to her death for want of care. The playwright’s impassioned plea, though tacit, is that women must not remain deaf and dumb. They must come forward, become articulate and vindicate their position as compared to men. John Galsworthy, in his plays, aimed almost exclusively at the representation of contemporary life, in its familiar, everyday aspects. To him, the humdrum world around us provided quite sufficient dramatic material for his purposes. In the first place, dramatic themes are suggested by the various family relationships of

life. The loyal ties or antagonisms of husband and wife, the struggle to escape from an unhappy marriage, revolt of youth against parental authority and control, the generosity of young people and the powers of attraction they exercise on one another—these provided Galsworthy with admirable subjects for dramatic treatment.

The play “Justice” by John Galsworthy deals with the issues of crime and punishment criticising the judicial system of the world where the rich always go scot free leaving the poor to rot in the prison.

Highlighting the incident of forgery where the culprit is put behind bars resulting in the triumph of justice, Galsworthy wants his readers to realise the circumstances under which the poor man decides to commit this illegal act; thus, persuading the audience to read and watch the play with a humanitarian eye instead of the eyes of the worldly law system.

Revolving around the story of the poor clerk Falder and a miserable wife Ruth socially and sexually harassed by her husband, the play Justice throws light upon the misery and plight of the poor individuals of the society leading their lives like outcasts. Feeling for the helplessness of Ruth, Falder decides to take her out of her misery by forging a cheque in order to help the miserable wife.

He promises Ruth a happy and satisfied life away from all these troubles. However, Falder is caught by his superiors and brought to the court where the judge finds him guilty of forgery and illicit relationship with a married woman; therefore, the jury decides to send Falder in a solitary confinement to spend the rest of his days there. Even when Falder gets out of the prison, he never finds freedom in his life and thus embraces death to get rid of his troubles and worries.

Showing the apparent triumph of the justice and the judicial system in the play, Galsworthy wants his readers to ponder upon the terrible lives of Falder and Ruth that lead them to indulge in such unlawful acts. The playwright has shown the failure of the legal system which gives severe punishments to the poor without taking into regard the circumstances behind their crimes. The poor Falder is sentenced easily when he forges a cheque out of necessity but Ruth's rich husband is never punished for harassing his wife. This double standard of the judicial system is highly criticised by the author which sympathizes with the rich and punish the poor and downtrodden.

Galsworthy, in plays like "Strife" and "Justice", has suffered from a neutralising impartiality. But in *The Mob*, his passions are sufficiently aroused for him to allow his hero an unnerving Coriolanus-like contempt for the mob; and even though Galsworthy shows a measure of sympathy for More's wife, whose brother is called to the front, he also suggests that she shamelessly uses sexual blackmail to break her husband's militant pacifism.

Galsworthy's reaction to the First World War found its expression in "The Mob" (1914), in which the voice of a statesman is drowned in the madness of the war-hungry masses. "The Pigeon" also discloses to us the inadequacy of charity, individual and organized, to cope with poverty, as well as the absurdity of reformers and experimenters who attempt to patch up effects while they ignore the causes.

The central figure in "The Mob" is forty year old Stephen More who has been a Member of Parliament for Toulmin for nine years. He occupies the position of Under-Secretary of State, and has good prospects of being raised to Cabinet rank. But More is an idealist who holds strong views on the subject of national righteousness, and will not change from his principles for anybody. At this time, it happens that England is on the point of declaring war which More thinks is wrong. He believes his country is about to attack a small and weak state simply for purposes of self-aggrandizement, and he is resolved to denounce such all action in the House of Commons. This causes him difficulty. His wife's father, Sir John Julian, is a General who has served in the army for fifty years. His wife's uncle, the Dean of Stour, is a parson with ardent views on military patriotism. His wife's newly-married brother, Herbert Julian, is an army officer who is among the first to be sent out in the service of his country. Two other brothers, Ralph and George, are already at the front. In spite of these domestic difficulties, however, and even though he knows it will ruin his promising political career, More goes to the House of Commons and insists on giving his speech of protest after the English troops have crossed the frontier and been badly checked in the first encounter. He immediately becomes the center of fierce attacks and accusations. This stiffening attitude naturally inflames the rage of More's enemies even more. He is forced to resign his position in the House of Commons. He appeals to the people themselves, he is mobbed. Although the play seems to reflect the high tension and excited feeling during the early part of the First World War. His interesting and remarkable to learn that it was written in 1913 and actually produced before the war began. "The Mob" is a study of the eternal warfare always being emerged between fidelity to principle and worldly compromise. More belongs to the company of idealists who are first crucified. and then glorified and made saintly.

In "The Forest", we are in the regions of high finance, and made to feel the scope of its operations and the extent of its power. In the period of the late 'nineties, just before the Boer war, when African shares are in danger of going down, Adrian Bastable is interested in "South African Concessions" and sees that the shares will go up much in value if only the company can employ coolie labour. He is going to bring this about by diverting attention to the iniquities of the slave trade in the Belgian Central Africa. He arranges that an expedition, led by a John Strood, shall set out from the coast and bring back word of this slavery in time for the general meeting of "South African Concessions," due to be held ten months later.

Strood is fine for this mission, since he is unscrupulous, and can easily stir up trouble in that territory. Suspicion is thrown off by the assurance that his expedition is being sent out to hunt up the remaining traces of Congo slave trade. On reaching Lake Albert Edward Nyanza, Strood hears a rumour that diamonds have been discovered farther south, and he immediately sets out to find them and claim them for England. Unfortunately, he makes an enemy of a half-caste Arab girl who does not understand him or his ethics. And, as he passes through a district which is infested with swamps and cannibals, he is surrounded and killed. His death is suspected, but not known for certain by the only member of the party who survives, and who duly reports in London the complete failure of the expedition. Therefore, at the general meeting of "South Africa Concessions, II the proposal to employ coolie labour is rejected and the shares fall.

The cases of social injustice dealt with here are very different, yet they are alike in that they show the great egoism of human nature. People fail to think in terms of common good, or to imagine the effects of their actions upon others. There is too much acquiescence in life, and not enough charity and understanding.

2. CONCLUSION

Galsworthy is pre-eminently a realist. He is that artist whose temperamental preoccupation is with the revelation of the actual inter-relating spirit of life, character and thought, with a view to enlightening himself and others. He is

distinguished from that artist whom, he calls romantic-whose temperamental purpose is the invention of a tale or design with a view to delighting himself and others

Galsworthy does not want to identify himself with any individual or group. He aims at impartiality or a sort of negative capability. He observes: "Every grouping of life and character has its inherent moral; and the business of the dramatist is to pose the group as to bring that moral poignantly to the light of day." He says that he is no reformer but only a painter of pictures, and observes: "The sociological character of my plays arises from the fact that I do not divorce from life". Objectivity is the principal characteristic of Galsworthy's technique both in the novel and the drama.

3. REFERENCES

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