



Social injustice in the plays of Galsworthy

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Abstract

John Galsworthy is one of the important modern playwrights. His plays have unique social implications. His very themes are family relationships, social injustice, social deterioration, caste feeling with morality and tragedy of idealism. This paper is an attempt to show social injustice in the select plays of Galsworthy. We will discuss three plays which brought the social injustice before us. They are "*The Silver Box*", "*The Show*" and "*The Forest*". In "*The Silver Box*" we find the mechanical, almost unconscious favoring of the rich at the expense of the poor in a court of law. "*The Show*" demonstrates how acute may be the suffering and wrong inflicted on private individuals through the needless gratifying of public curiosity by means of Press and other ways. "*The Forest*" is about the Pounce of nature, and the ways in which that pounce may still persist in what we call civilization, illustrated by an exposure of some of the methods by which extensive swindling may take place in the regions of high finance.

Keywords: indignation and suffering, tragedy of idealism, moral earnestness

Introduction

In modern drama John Galsworthy occupies an important and a distinctive place. He has his affinities; it is true, with other eminent playwrights of the past and of the present. He writes well-made plays dealing with social problems. His naturalism is like that of Ibsen, like him he was against the old drama, and followed the trend of realism and naturalism in his plays. He shares the moral earnestness of G.B. Shaw in his plays. As a practitioner of realist theatre he believed in using the stage to set out human follies, inconsistencies and injustice. In his preoccupation with the sores and diseases of society he resembles Brieux, like him his plays are being aimed at some weakness or iniquity of the social system. Though he resembles to other great dramatists but his essential qualities of art are not borrowed. Whether we see his plays upon the stage, or read them in the quietness of the study, we feel impressed by a psychological insight, a social passion, an artistic economy and restraint, which are his own qualities. In his plays we find Galsworthy's sincerity, sympathy and impartiality as a writer. There is prevailing irony also with the feeling of pity and indignation in his plays.

We now discuss three plays in which one aspect or another of social injustice is brought before us. In *The Silver Box* we find the mechanical, almost unconscious favoring of the rich at the expense of the poor in a court of law. *The Show* demonstrates how acute may be the suffering and wrong inflicted on private individuals through the needless gratifying of public curiosity by means of Press and in other ways. *The Forest* is about the Pounce of nature, and the ways in which that pounce may still persist in what we call civilization, illustrated by an exposure of some of the methods by which extensive swindling may take place, in the regions of high finance.

The Silver Box starts when Jack Barthwick, son of the Barthwick family, comes home at night drunk, carrying a lady's reticule (handbag). Jones, whose wife is the charwoman for the Barthwicks, has helped him to

unlock the door, and is given a drink by Jack. Jack falls asleep on the sofa; Jones takes a purse that has fallen from the reticule, and a silver box – a cigarette box – and leaves. So Jack Barthwick and Jim Jones are found to be guilty of the theft on the same evening. The former steals a woman's sky-blue velvet reticule, containing a crimson silk purse; the latter steals a silver cigarette box mainly. In many particulars as we will see, the cases are exactly parallel. But there is one important difference: Jack is the son of a wealthy Liberal Member of Parliament and Jones is a loafer out of work. In the service of Jack's father, there is a charwoman, Mrs. Jones who is suspected of theft because she was the only one person present in the room when the box was found missing. Mrs. Jones is appalled to find that he has a purse and the missing cigarette box at her home. Jones says: "I'm no thief. I'm no worse than wot that young Barthwick is; he brought 'ome that purse I picked up – a lady's purse – 'ad it off 'er in a row, kept sayin' 'ed scored 'er off. Well, I scored 'im off.... And d'you thinks anything'll happen to him?" (Act II, scene I)

Later the box was found in her house when a visit is paid to it by the police-inspector Snow. Rather than let the blame fall on her husband, Mrs. Jones is on the point of being taken to custody for stealing the box, when Jones himself owns to the theft and violently assaults Snow for presuming to lay hands wrongfully upon his wife. It becomes a police court case and follows. Barthwick Senior tried his best to save his son and hide his connection with the case. He says, as he looks gloomily at Jack, "This prosecution goes very much against the grain with me. I have great sympathy with the poor. In my position I'm bound to recognize the distress there is amongst them", he was most anxious to keep his own name out of the papers, he therefore hires a solicitor to defend his son and in the end after a rapid enquiry, the theft of Jack is passed over and Jones is condemned to one month's hard labor. Jones was punished because he was poor and couldn't afford a solicitor to defend him like Jack. We can clearly see that there is social injustice in the play.

There are many points reflecting this social injustice in the play. In the first place we notice that they both are almost but not quite parallel: and where parallelism fails, the difference is in favor of Jones. They both were drunk when the theft takes place. Both lost their interest in the theft articles after they have been stolen and both are without feelings of moral culpability for what they have done. They differ from each other when Jones gives a truthful account of the incident as he recollected while Jack feigned to be forgetfulness and lied to all. Though the theft is wrong in both the cases but Jack was the man of good fortune and Jones was a rogue, without any work, with a wife and three children. This was the only difference which makes Jones suffer. If we analyze the facts we find that Jones was punished for the noblest thing he ever did—that was defending the honor of his wife against an accusation.

It was the power of wealth which diverted the course of justice, if Jones could have a good reputation in society and money, he would have saved himself. Had Jack been a poor man he would have been convicted. Because of the political influence of Barthwick all the wrong things put to be correct, moreover he is able to employ a solicitor who is skilled in police-court cases and having the ability to intervene on behalf of his client at awkward moments in the prosecution of the case. The magistrate himself was frowningly impressed by Jones and his wife that “Drunkenness is no excuse”. He also worked in the favor of Jack. Even the constable repeatedly suppresses Jones by saying “Hssh!” but makes no effort to silence Jack or his Friends. The final result is as we all know that rich man is acquitted and the poor man is condemned.

It was not only Jones who suffered rather Mrs. Jones also suffered who is loyal to her husband and she stands by him always and works to support him, though he is unfaithful to her but she stayed with him. During Jones imprisonment she loses her job and finds herself ejected from her lodgings for arrears of rent. Had she rejected her husband when he got arrested she might have prospered; because she is a constant and dutiful lady. So the social injustice in this play is clearly visible.

Next we turn to *The Show*. In this play Galesworthy shows another aspect of social injustice. The play starts with a suicide and the dominant role is played by the Press. Colin Morecombe is an airman who has committed suicide by shooting himself through heart. He was a famous man and eminent in his profession having been wounded three times, and having been penetrating further into Germany in bombing expeditions. His death is therefore a matter of public interest and this case was investigated by the Press as well as by the police. A brisk reporter, hungry for news, interviews everybody connected to this affair. In view of the approaching coroner's inquest, a detective does the same, rummaging among letters, pestering people with questions about the deceased's health, love-affairs, balance at the bank, and so on, even subjecting his victims to the indignity of emptying their pockets and feeling their bodies all over for concealed correspondence. Newspaper editors meet to pry into the matter and discuss what the public wants and what it is to get. Later, a jury of eight men is called upon to view the body and say why it has become defunct.

In the course of enquiry a number of suspicious circumstances are brought to light. It is found that Morecombe had been married for Four years that he had lived apart from his wife for the past fifteen months, and

that she was in the room of another man, Geoffrey Darrel, when the suicide took place. Now there were so many rumors and questions in the minds of the people. Was her infidelity then the cause of her husband's death? Next we came to know that Morecombe himself spent the preceding day at Richmond with Daisy Odiham, a young restaurant waitress who had been his mistress for about a year, and she became overwhelmed with grief when she heard about his death. This case was becoming more interesting day by day as some secrets were revealing to the public every day. It became a great matter of interest for everyone. Next some relatives of dead man came into light. Colonel Roland, his father-in-law, an old fashioned Irish Catholic of nearly seventy, is shocked by the revelation of his daughter's affair with Darrel. On the other hand Lady Morecombe, the airman's mother, who thinks her son only as a hero is similarly disappointed after hearing this news. Moreover the exposure of her son's reputed shame with Daisy left her heartbroken. There may be other reasons for this suicide, she says, but they should be “known to God alone”. Another character is Daisy's father, a house painter who is annoyed and wanted to know why his daughter is publicly disgraced? “It's a warnin' against ‘avin' a private life”. (*The Show*, 57)

There were so many suspects but still no clue what actually happened. Then a clue was founded that Morecombe had written a letter the day before his death, but his maid posted it without noticing its address. Who received it and what was written in that letter remained a secret till the very end. Only in the end of the play, when all the havoc of publicity has been wrought, it is revealed that the letter was written by Morecombe to his friend, Lieutenant Oswald, R.N., to inform him about his insanity. The writer was addicted to fits of temporary insanity and twice before he had been “off his chump” and this was the reason of his separation of his wife from last fifteen months. “She wanted children and I dare not and couldn't tell her why” now the horrible feeling is coming to me for the third time.” “I can't stick it, old man. Better for myself and everybody that I should clear out. Good bye and God bless you. Comfort my poor mother”. (182) Now see and think how much harm that had already done. A dead man's reputation has been ruined: the two who were dearest to him have been publicly exposed and insulted by dragging their private matters in public. And what was the outcome since everybody was on the wrong scent after all. Who should be blamed for this? Obviously we can't blame the principal characters as they loathed publicity. Colonel Ronald exclaims: “My only daughter tarred and feathered before my eyes, pilloried in the papers! The public all agog! These women who come and gloat!” nor can we find fault in the detective as he fulfilled his duty to study the case and throw light on the very circumstances of the death. The jurymen also worked according to their rights and give the humanist verdict they can under such circumstances.

We can only blame the Press to some extent as the reporters and editors of the news papers gave it far more notoriety than it deserves. Galsworthy used the Press and journalists in his five plays and in none of them they appeared in favorable light. Here in *The Show* Colonel Ronald called them “ghoulish harpies and cats who feed a gaping public on any garbage of devil's gossip that will sell their paper.” Even the police inspector says “Confound these fellers- like flies the way they buzz round a carcass.” (*The Show*, 71-77) So we can say that press is responsible for the misery of so

many people. They were never concerned about the truth they were just busy in selling the news for their own benefits. But the Press is not the only group to be blamed because the society equally plays an important role in it. The Press represents the facts before us as we want them to be. As Galsworthy says that there is no healthy curiosity in the people, but morbid, excessive, and impertinent curiosity, the cruel tendency in all of us to gloat over the misfortunes of the others, and regard their discomfiture as “a show” or a theme for unkindly gossip.

“There is nothing like better than seeing people skinned”, says Margaret Orme in *Loyalties*. (*Scene-1, Line 5-6*) We just love scandals, sensation, this depraved appetite for the most nauseous details of divorce-court cases or gruesome murders, this vulgar craving to poke and intrude into the private affairs of eminent public personages, is one of the most deplorable evils of modern life. Through this play Galsworthy wanted to get our attention towards the suffering of others and to remind us about the social cruelty that simply arises from insensitiveness and lack of imagination, the failure to enter sympathetically into the feelings of others or to put ourselves into the place of those whom we make our victims. We became indifferent towards the sufferings of others; lack of morality can be easily seen in the modern peoples. Thus we can see the social cruelty or injustice in the play caused by the society.

The next play to discuss here is *The Forest*, although it was written before *The Show*, we may take it the last. Here we will find the region of high finance and made to feel vividly the scope of its operations and extent of its power. The setting of the play is of the late nineties, just before the Boer War, when African shares were in danger of sagging. Adrian Bastaple is deeply interested in “South African Concessions” and sees that shares will go up enormously in value if only the company can employ coolie labor. Collie labor may be introduced just to divert public attention to the iniquities of the slave trade in Belgian Central Africa. There an expedition was arranged and it was decided that it will be led by John Strood, and the purpose behind this expedition was to bring back tidings of slavery in the Upper Congo during the time of the general meeting of “South African Concessions”, which was going to be held ten months later. Strood was a man after Bastaple’s own heart, in the matter of determination he was a type of person who “could not die to save his life”. Meanwhile an official of the Foreign Office undertakes to secure the swift passage of Strood from Mombasa through Uganda to Lake Albert Edward Nyanza. The Non-conformists and Liberals who might suspect the scheme are side-tracked by an assurance that the expedition is sent out to hunt up the remaining traces of the Congo slave trade. Some imperialists also like Robert Beton approve for Coolie Labor as a means of opening up the Empire for the White man in future. Bastaple himself invests 10000 pounds in the enterprise and the expedition starts.

When the expedition reached Lake Albert Edward Nyanza, Strood heard a rumour that diamonds have been discovered in farther South, and he immediately sets out to find them in the hope to win a large district for his country. He did not tell anyone about his plan and when he was on the way he got treacherously killed by swamps and cannibals. The expedition was completely failed, and Bastaple immediately adjusts his plan to this new situation. At the general meeting of “South African Concessions” the proposal to employ

coolie labor was rejected and the shares accordingly fall. Now Bastaple played a trick and falsely announces that Strood has discovered the diamonds and reached the coast. After this announcement the shares immediately rise. And Bastaple takes the advantage of the situation and sells out his shares at enormous profit. He sent 205,000 pounds (10%) to his confidential man, Farrell so that he can escape easily from this situation.

Somehow the play seems to be parallel to Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. Here also we find the conflict between civilized man with the nature and hostile savages in the heart of primeval forest and the indomitable spirit of British Empire. Here again we find injustice, it’s a case of gross injustice accompanied by the infliction of a vast amount of suffering. Hundreds of investors have been fraudulently robbed; Strood and other members of the expedition have lost their lives, a company of native carriers have been slave-driven in the most brutal manner. Though the case of injustice dealt in this play is different yet we find one thing common that is self-centered egoism of human nature which can be seen clearly in the character of Bastaple, who made so many people suffer for his own financial benefit, how he is quite indifferent to the sufferings of native people of Africa.

After analyzing all the three plays of Galsworthy, we can see that social injustice flourishes in various forms in our society but largely it is because of selfish apathy of human nature. Human beings are not able to connect themselves with the others, they can’t imagine their suffering. They become self-centered and that’s why this injustice is prevailing in society. We are quite indifferent towards the feelings of others. On this subject one is reminded of the reflections of Felix in *The Freeland*: “This world where men, and women too what they had, took what they could; this world of seeing only one thing at a time; this world of force, and cunning, of struggle, and primitive appetites; of such good things, too, such patience, endurance, heroism-and yet ate heart unutterably savage!” (*Chapter XXX, 128*)

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