



John Galsworthy: A Voice of the Middle Class People

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ABSTRACT

Galsworthy is one of the sincerest and most straightforward of writers; literary, in the best sense of the word, clear, simple, and direct, he never fails to impress his readers and his audience with the meaning and importance of the play or novel under consideration. He is humanitarian in the broadest sense of the word: he is more than a socialist or a reformer, he is a sympathetic artist. In his plays he assumes so fair an attitude toward his characters and his audience that he at times almost fails to convince; in his dramatic style his reticence is occasionally so great that he incurs the danger of under-emphasis. Galsworthy is so sensitive that he perhaps over-estimates the sensitiveness of his audience. He is altogether one of the finest Intellectuals and dramatic forces of the English stage. As in the novel *Fraternity*, and the plays *Strife* and *Justice*, he refuses to accept the class divisions which separate ordinary West End drama from life as a whole. He takes up the floor of the drawing-room and shows us the kitchen. He examines the psychology of the butler as minutely as that of the member of Parliament. He follows the charwoman home to her tenement dwelling. He gives us the history of her husband in search of work. He introduces the solicitor, the detective, the prostitute. He accompanies the police-court missionary upon his rounds. He sits upon the bench with the magistrate. Each of these persons moves upon a separate daily round, a separate social plane; but he brings them all together and makes drama of their lives.

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Introduction

John Galsworthy, the 1932 Nobel Laureate, is best known problem playwright and novelist in the 20th century. His is the collections which treats of a particular social or moral problems so as to make people think intelligently about it. It is usually somewhat tragic in tone in that it naturally deals with painful human dilemmas. It is a kind of writings that, by implication, asks a definite question and either supplies an answer or leave it to us to find. One of his best known plays *The Silver Box* deals with the inequality of Justice, *Strife* with the struggle between capital and labour, *Justice* with the cruelty of solitary confinement, *The Skin Game* with the different values of the old aristocracy and the newly rich businessman, *Loyalties* with class loyalties and prejudices and *Escape* with the inadequacy of the administration of justice and attitude of different types of people toward an escaped prisoner. His dramas frequently find their themes in this stratum of society, but also often deal, sympathetically, with the economically and socially oppressed and with questions of social justice. Galsworthy was a social reformer, objectively and impartially posing a problem, showing always both sides of the question, and leaving his audience to think out the answer. His chief protagonists are usually social forces in conflict with each other, and the human features in his drama, though real enough and very true to ordinary life, are studies more as products of these force than an individuals who are of interest for their own sake.

All the plays of Galsworthy exhibit the same features the omnipresence of a fundamental social problem expressed in a severely natural manner, without straining of situation or exaggeration of final issues, a corresponding naturalism of dialogue, leading at times to an apparent ordinariness, a native kindness of heart added to the sternness of the true tragic artist, and a complete absence of sentimentalism even when pitiful scenes are introduced. About the effectiveness of his naturalistic technique Galsworthy has no doubt, and this is why he says,

“The aim of the dramatist employing naturalistic technique is obviously to create such an illusion of actual life passing on the stage as to compel the spectator to pass through an experience of his own, to think and talk and move with the people he sees thinking, talking, moving in front of him”.

Galsworthy’s first care was to set before his audience a clear statement, without taking sides with one party or the other. He mentions in the essay above quoted three courses which are open to the dramatist:

- (1) to give the public what it wants; (2) to give it what he thinks it ought to have, and
- (3) “to set before the public no cut-and-dried codes, but the phenomena of life and character, selected and combined, but not distorted, by the dramatist’s outlook, set down without fear, favor, or prejudice, leaving the public to draw such poor moral as nature may afford.

This third method requires a certain detachment; it requires a sympathy with, a love of, and a curiosity as to, things for their own sake; it requires a far view, together with patient industry, for no immediately practical result. That “certain detachment” is to be seen throughout *Strife*. The dramatist’s “sympathy with ... things for their own sake” is observed in the balance of the scenes. For example, we are first made to see the representatives of capital, then Harness is introduced, and, a moment later, “the men.”

Justice is a propaganda and seems to have been conceived on an ecstasy of rage against human oppression. The hero is not unjustly imprisoned because he altered the figures of a cheque. In this play the real criminal is not the Falder but civilized people, society and its prison system. Galsworthy in his play *Justice* does everything to draw the attention of his audience to the evil of solitary confinement and its shattering effect on the prisoners. *Justice* made a great impact not only on the audience but it created a sensation in the British Parliament and official circles. The government was given a Jolt and the prison commission was appointed to revise the prison laws. If not for anything else, on this score alone *Justice* can be considered as one of the most successful and important sociological plays of the first half of this century. All of Galsworthy’s collections are realistic approaches to social problems and in his *Justice* the entire social fabric, the legal system and the prison administration stand exposed as the play finds its denouement in the death of Falder who is more sinned against than sinning.

Galsworthy’s pre-World War I plays, like *The Silver Box* (1906) and *Strife* (1909), were seen as radical, practically socialist, in bringing the plight of the working class to the public conscience. Today they are more easily viewed as calls for class conciliation. And his later plays more often deal with conflicts over social issues within the wealthy classes.

Strife is the third party play of Galsworthy and it is considered by many to be the best. It was finished about the end of April, 1907 and its subject was the most burning problem of the day; the struggle between labor and capital. The fact that Galsworthy took up a living subject like this for his drama is a measure of the depth of his social consciousness and of the gradual progress he is making in his understanding of society. Indeed, when he composed this play, no other question was of more importance in England, than this.

Although *Strife* centers on the conflict between labour 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. Galsworthy wrote this play at a time when the rights of laborers were only beginning to be asserted. *STRIFE* presents a picture of both sides of the strike question, for Galsworthy was always an impartial realist. Aside from its social implications, the play is also notable for several very real and forceful characters, Roberts and old Anthony among them.

The ostensible dispute in *STRIFE* is between the Directors of the Trenartha Tin Plate Works and their striking workers, but, as the play progresses, it becomes evident that the conflict is actually between John Anthony, the Chairman of the Directors, and David Roberts, the leader of the strikers. Thus, the play is not so much about Capital versus Labor as it is about the relationship between leaders and followers and the thin line that separates dedicated, courageous idealism from egocentric, self-destructive fanaticism.

Both leaders are adamantly opposed to compromise and have, at least for most of the play, the power to impose their views on the others. Each of them sees the conflict solely in terms of total victory or abject defeat. Both Anthony and Roberts believe that the future of the entire economic and social system is at stake in this particular strike.

Each man’s intransigence, however, is also fed by motives that are purely personal, even petty. Hardened by advancing age and precarious health, Anthony has identified with the company to the point where he sees it as an extension of himself; he can accept no questioning of his motives or judgments by anybody. On the other hand, because of a profitable invention that he feels was “stolen” from him for a pittance, Roberts nurses a personal vendetta against the company. Thus, both men are deeply committed to their respective causes and to the social classes they represent; at the same time, both are obviously flawed and bring questionable personal motives into the struggle. It is this mixture of good and bad, strength and weakness, idealism and petty spite, that gives these characters their reality and stature and adds a tragic dimension to their clash.

However, in spite of his awareness of human fallibility, Galsworthy was essentially a believer in man’s rationality and capacity to control his own fate. In fixing their rigid postures, Anthony and Roberts have both ignored the human element, but before the confrontation leads to ruin for the company and general starvation for the workers, the moderate elements on both sides rise up and shunt their fanatical leaders aside. However, it takes the death of Roberts’ wife to provoke those followers to action.

Man’s moderation and sensible self-interest, Galsworthy seems to say, will ultimately win out over fanaticism, but the process is slow, painful, and very imperfect. And, in the meantime, the innocent will suffer—for nothing. In *Strife*, Galsworthy makes the invisible social structure the hero and the characters act mere puppets. They have very little independent existence. Even when they are individualized; they are intensely typical. They represent common human lapses and weaknesses. All of them show their weakest spots in a time of struggle. All of them are selfish human beings. They suffer from internal schisms and rivalries. Anthony and Roberts are left alone. Their followers drift away from them and end the strife on their own terms. Hence, it is not the personal hero that governs the events of the play. It is the social structure and that is where the fun comes in Galsworthy’s play, *Strife* which strongly stresses this type of injustice. One fully realizes how utterly hopeless the life of workers is. They simply cannot raise their hand and walk like the equal and free species of the mankind.

Silver box is a powerful and bitter play. It is a criticism of the English legal system in which a distinction is made between the rich and the poor. The scene starts in London police court. Two little girls, there as lives and mand livens are presented before the magistrate. The charge against them was that they were found wondering about on the road. On enquiry it was found that their father is jobless and their mother had run away with a man leaving them to wonder about. The magistrate heard the statement of their father and the decision was postponed for the next hearing which was to be held after a week.

After the case, the case of steeling a silver box came up for hearing. Mr. Jones was accused of theft. Mrs. Jones was a maid-servant in the house of Mr. Barth wick, a rich person and also a member of Parliament. His son, Jack is a carefree and dissolute young man. On Easter Monday, Jack reached at his home late at night in a drunken state. He was trying to open the door with the help of key, but failed to do so, On account of taking heavy quantity of wine. Mr. Jones was there, he helped him in opening the door. Jack invited him to his room for a drink. They drank together and Jack fell a sleep. Jones was not in a condition to judge between right or wrong. He took the silver cigarette case as well as the purse with the money which was stolen by Jack of a women, and went home. In the morning the matter was reported to the police. A police man went to the house of Mr. Jones to find out the theft. The police man misbehaved Mrs. Jones, on account of this Mr. Jones assaulted the police man and was arrested for this ass ult. The police recovered the stolen things from the house. During the course of trail, it came to light that there was not only one theft. In fact there were two thefts of the same kind. Jack stole the purse of a woman in drunken state, similarly John took the cigarette case and the stolen purse in a fit of drunkenness. Jones was not a thief because he did not enter the room to steal, but had an invitation from Jack for a drink. Mrs. Jones very strongly pleaded that her husband had never committed theft before.

The case about Jack was hushed up by his influential father. He insisted that Jones might be tried simply of an ass ult to the police and creating hindrance in

the execution of official duty. So, after a long discussion, the magistrate set at Mrs. Jones free and orders one month imprisonment with hard labour for Mr. Jones, Jack went set free. Even the charge was not framed against him. Mrs. Jones also lost her job and thus a poor family completely destroyed.

In another play 'Loyalties', the major theme, as the name of the book suggests, is Loyalty. Every person in the play, and otherwise also, is loyal to something or someone and whatever they do, they do it to serve their loyalties. Charles Winsor and Lady Adela speak rather bitterly about Dancy in the beginning but then support him throughout not because they are loyal to Dancy but because they are loyal to their religion.

De Levis is loyal to his religion and the truth. General Canyng is loyal to the army and Dancy is a retired DSO so for the sake of the army's reputation he does not disclose the fact about Dancy's wet sleeves openly to all. He rather becomes quieter and pretends not to know about any such thing. Mabel Dancy remains loyal to her husband even after knowing the truth. The lawyer, Mr. Twisden, remains loyal to his profession and, though tries to help Dancy, he doesn't dishonor his position. However, loyalties of different people sometimes go hand in hand and sometimes they cut through each other.

Another major theme is Social Convention and this theme further unfolds other sub-themes like prejudice, fake prestige, hypocrisy, and injustice. The audience can feel the air of prejudice when Winsor talks about De Levis and says he's a son of a carpet seller. Gradually, we see many such instances when the characters whisper at the back of De Levis and try to suppress the matter of theft. Nobody really cares about De Levis' money but they all show their concerns, especially Winsor only for the sake of his reputation. Dancy keeps lying openly to maintain his fake prestige. General Canyng remains quiet for the prestige of the army. The rich and high society people are squabbling while whom they consider of the lower class, De Levis, stays away from fighting and speaks only as much as it is absolutely essential which shows the epitome of hypocrisy. They are all out to bully, harass, and abuse the aggrieved De Levis and protect Dancy at the cost of anything which is an injustice to De Levis and the entire Jew community.

Third and the harshest theme is Antisemitism which means prejudice or discrimination against the Jews. There is this constant pull and push between truth and honor. Truth stands on one side and honor on the other. This tug-of-war gives rise to injustice served to De Levis and dishonesty shown by all the other characters. It is then left to the audience to decide what wins in the end.

Conclusion

Galsworthy the practical dramatist follows the rules of Galsworthy the theorist: "The art of writing true dramatic dialogue is an austere art, denying itself all license, grudging every sentence devoted to the mere machinery of the play, suppressing all jokes and epigrams severed from character, relying for fun and pathos on the fun and tears of life. From start to finish good dialogue is hand-made, like good lace; clear, of fine texture, furthering with each thread the harmony and strength of a design to which all must be subordinated. "Throughout the first scene of the second act the characters of the people are laid bare with admirable clear-sightedness and detachment of vision. If the poor are in a bad condition, it is somewhat the fault of their pride and dogged tenacity. Madge Thomas's reply, "What suffering? ... Who said their was suffering?" reveals a person much nearer to actual life than would that of a whining and humble woman. In brief, then, Galsworthy shows that if the rich are hard, they have a modicum of the milk of human kindness, and that if the poor are miserable, they are at times stubborn and haughty. Further on in the same essay the author remarks: "*Now, true dramatic action is what characters do, at once contrary, as it were, to expectation and yet because they have already done other things.*"

Galsworthy means here that the dramatist should not invent situations and adhere to a fixed plan when he is dealing with units which are intended to represent human beings. When, therefore, a character acts "contrary, as it were, to expectation," it is because we, the audience, do not know their true character. It is by means of unexpected turns and the revelation of motives hitherto unknown to the audience, that a dramatist paints character: he unrolls it, and the personages develop. Again this author's wide sympathy with life urges him to state that it is pretty difficult to determine just what a human

being will do next. Follow carefully the scenes in which Roberts, or any other of the principal characters, appears, bearing in mind the remarks above quoted.

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