

DIGNITY IN DESPAIR: POVERTY AND INJUSTICE IN JOHN GALSWORTHY'S MAJOR PLAYS

Dr. A. Arun Daves ¹, Dr. S. Sowmiya ²

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli

Abstract

John Galsworthy, a celebrated Edwardian playwright, novelist, and social commentator, bridged the values of the late Victorian era with the emerging complexities of his contemporary society. His incisive critiques of social and economic injustices — particularly regarding the poor and dispossessed — remain strikingly relevant today. This paper examines Galsworthy's major plays—The Silver Box (1906), Strife (1909), Justice (1910), Loyalties (1922), The Skin Game (1920), and The Fugitive (1913)—which boldly illustrate the poverty and social injustice prevalent in industrializing England. Through his characters, Galsworthy portrays the strength of the struggle for dignity in a class-ridden society and the moral challenges faced when evil prevails. His works dramatize the social and ethical implications of economic injustice, showing how it strips individuals of dignity, responsibility, and humanity. Galsworthy offers a nuanced, emotionally layered portrayal of poverty, focusing not only on material deprivation but also on its psychological and moral consequences. By highlighting the shortcomings of the legal system, the apathy of the affluent, and the resilience of the human spirit, Galsworthy critiques his society and explores humanity's universal craving for respect and justice. This paper concludes that Galsworthy's plays serve as a timeless source of inspiration, uncovering forgotten narratives that only theater can bring to light.

Keyword: John Galsworthy, Poverty, Social injustice, Dignity, Class conflict, Industrialization

1.INTRODUCTION

John Galsworthy was the high priest of social realism, and his pen dissected the flesh of wrong inequality like a moral surgeon. He advocated for the poor and downtrodden by way of his plays, rendering their oppression with brutal clarity. Thus Galsworthy's work is far more than an examination of what has gone wrong within society; his works are strong condemnations full of love, compassion and unwavering pursuit for human dignity. Galsworthy writes against the background of Britain as an emerging heavy industrial power which makes rich many but horrible destitute some and sees its world inexorably moving towards social revolution (first the defeat by communists of both the whites under Bourgeois liberalism and Tsarist tyranny, after 1917 first Leninism then Stalinism). His plays speak to the moral and social dimensions of this divide, presenting poverty not just as a material condition that deprives people of resources but also, and more profoundly, of dignity, rights and humanity. His characters, often living at the mercy of circumstances like poverty and social hierarchy, resonate with a timeless frustration demanding reformation and justice — rendering his legacy today as pertinent to our times as they ever were in their own.

He was unique from other character critics in plays by Galsworthy as he portrayed the social injustices very realistically. He treated the theatre as a laboratory, a workshop where he could observe how poverty was enforced by laws, industrial processes and socio-economic order. Gradually one came to understand that his major works functioned as damning indictments of the voiceless and powerless at the bottom of the social heap, calling for justice, compassion and reform. In this respect, the paper will draw on six of Galsworthy's major plays to suggest that his depiction of poverty and social injustice is organised around the idea that in the confrontation between a person's struggle for dignity

and class/societal structures lies one of the central elements of his critique.

2. THE SILVER BOX (1906) ABOUT POVERTY

The Silver Box: Searing indictment of the British legal system and its class prejudices. Galsworthy presents this two sided image in the play, on the one hand two men commit a crime which can be said to be identical though their future largely angles differently only due to class system. A poor man named Jones steals a silver box that belongs to the Barthwick family, and Jack Barthwick, the overpampered son of a rich family, picks up a woman's purse. The courts let Jack off barely with well-worn justice chestnuts — crime/ youthful exuberance; Jones never enjoys the same luxury. The play lays bare the idea that ultimately, justice is a rich man's luxury.

The trap of poverty that degrades yet more is achieved in The Silver Box. Working-class Jones steals for a living and goes desperately needs money to support his family. This latter character serves as a foil to depict how poverty robs people of moral agency; in a world where existence is not certain, ethics are at best impractical. The play was equally effective as an angry social protest calling attention to the indifference of the upper classes. The Barthwicks give little genuine thought to Jones and his future — or the social conditions that drove him to commit a crime. The Silver Box thus exposes how the arbitrariness of the legal system, and its lack of concern with moral intention or character, conceals a thoroughgoing immorality on the part of those who enjoy parliamentary privileges.

But The Silver Box fundamentally a depiction of the fight to reclaim one's humanity in an impersonal system. Even with the cards stacked so high against him, Jones fights for some basic amount of respect and fairness in return to the wealth he will never come close to seeing. The fact that Jack is shown such consideration by the Crown only serves to underline what happens far too often — the poor are denied dignity while the more privileged, such as Jack, are able somewhat to escape their consequences. Galsworthy explores this in The Skin Game where he explains that the fight for respectability is a war of attrition against poverty-trapped inhabitants from the slums who are victims of law and privilege.

3. STRIFE: LABOR BATTLES AND CLASS STRUGGLE (1909)

Strife is Galsworthy's most open meditation on the class war between labor and capital. The play takes place during a lengthy factory strike, and the confrontation is between the factory owners, represented in stubborn John Anthony; and the workers, whom no less unyielding David Roberts leads to their ruin. Behind the workers' call for improved wages and working conditions in their strike lie two-opposing ideologies, that of capitalists fighting to increase profits by sharpening production-related variables (not just crops) against those who frame the countering ideology through a fight for survival and dignity.

Strife represents poverty as a main motive behavior for the workers rebellion. Galsworthy does a brilliant job capturing the essence of the ghastly lives that workers lead, where their poverty puts them in a state of neediness and thus desperation. These workers are not just fighting for their wages; they are fighting to stay alive in a system in which profit matters more than lives. There is no sugarcoating the pain of their experience, but it is a powerfully sympathetic one. From neither he nor the capitalists can be decent human beings: poverty dehumanizes workers and capitalists, and by their struggle they push each other down into management and cruel resistance. And yet we might remember that factory owners, having seemed so powerful, were also pitiable figures, subjects of a system in which profit was paramount and humanity simply incidental. Then everyone loses — the workers get a beatdown, and the owners only win an empty victory. The play also implies that no one can win in a society that allows poverty and inequality to continue.

Strife centres on a workers strike for pride in themselves, as they can't gain it from better working conditions but better and fair respect. Galsworthy is not of the opinion that dignity only means right salary, but it is associated with esteem and recognition of human values. The play reveals the way poverty renders weak those with human nature and how poverty forces people to humiliate themselves each day of their lives. The inevitable defeat of the workers underscores an ugly truth: In an unjust system, the struggle for dignity is all too easily drowned.

4. JUSTICE (1910) — THE INJUSTICE IN JUSTICE OF THE LEGAL SYSTEM

In *Justice*, Galsworthy focused on how narrowly the criminal justice was able to serve the poor. The story of the play revolves around William Falder, a clerk in his twenties who commits forgery to help the girl he loves break free from her marriage to an abusive husband. Falder is not a criminal in the traditional sense — his crime is rooted not in greed or maliciousness, but in empathy. But as far as the law is concerned, none of that matters and he is sentenced as if he were a common criminal. Clearly Falder has been a criminal, but through his story Galsworthy shows us just how inhumane and uncomprehending the legal system can be when faced with extenuating circumstances that turn people into criminals.

In *Justice*, Poverty is illustrated as a circle of no light. Once Falder is trapped in the system, it is like watching a life fall apart. He is not only deprived of his freedom in prison but comes away with a criminal record, which ensures nearly zero chance that he will be able to reintegrate into society. Galsworthy demonstrates how the legal process exacerbates poverty by passing criminalization on to the already disadvantaged population. This is not a story about the fall of a man, but what happens when we as society in part punish poor people and ignore why they do those types of things.

A common thread of dignity runs through *Justice*. Falder's crime is an act of preservation of the dignity of his beloved, but still he is treated as a criminal under the law by becoming less than human. Galsworthy condemns a society where law and order are more important than human sympathy; and which performs, instead of nursing. *Justice* is a critique not just of the criminal justice system, but of a society that denies the poor their humanity and dignity.

5. LOYALTIES (1922) — THE CLASS AND RACIAL TENSIONS

In *Loyalties* (1922) the poverty of *The Silver Box* gives way to a focus on class and orientalism, which has not entirely sidelined questions of economic inequality. Centered on an episode of theft during a country house party, in which a wealthy Jewish guest, Ferdinand De Levis, suspects another guest of having taken the money

out of his room. The claim ignites a series of events that reveal the classist and racist divides in aristocratic society.

Nevertheless, poverty remains a sub-theme in *Loyalties* which is essentially devoted to questions of loyalty, prejudice and social hypocrisy. De Levis, despite his riches, is excluded socially due to being a Jew and acting as an outsider aligned with the poverty of others. Instead, the play reveals that the wealthy are not automatically integrated into society and also that certain sections of society—whether by race or by class—are subject to differing forms of justice.

It is the battle over dignity, in this dramatisation of *Loyalties*. De Levis, with all his money, is unable to purchase the social position and respect he ought to command. This is in part due to the way he is treated by other characters, but moreso, it speaks to larger social inequalities present at such a time when the upperclass could be ostracized for being outside of social norms. In Galsworthy's novels, the search for self-worth is a matter of life and fading: it unites people no less from this point of view than low or new alike.

6. THE SKIN GAME (1920) — THE POISON OF PROSPERITY

The Skin Game is one of Galsworthy's plays about class conflict, in this case of the struggle between old money and new wealth. It concerns a revenge taken by an aristocratic Hillcrist family upon Steven Hornblower, a nouveau riche industrialist who has established a large plant near the home of the Hillcrist family. The tension increases when Hornblower purchases the neighboring piece of land to that on which the Hillcrist estate stands intent on building a factory, thereby destroying the pastoral peace his hosts hold so dear.

The main subject matter of *The Skin Game* is the deleterious effect money can have, and social class antipathy; but poverty are never that far away. Hornblower seems to symbolize the burgeoning industrial capitalist class, which has made money off of the backs of working class people. The play captures the extent to which pursuit of wealth results in moral erosion and environmental degradation. The Hillcrist family, despite being members of the old aristocracy, are in fact sympathetic because they symbolize a lifestyle which is now disappearing under the advance of capitalism.

The concept of dignity in *The Skin Game* is friction-free, everything for nothing liberalism with a body blow at its centre. For the Hillcrists, their struggle against Hornblower is about more than claiming a piece of land; it is to make sure they can hold on to their pride in light of industrial progress creeping closer. Galsworthy uses this conflict to condemn a society that will trade human rectitude and community for wealth and power.

7. FLEEING POVERTY IN THE FUGITIVE (1913)

Clare is a married woman in New York who knows she has to get out of her unhappy marriage if she wants any chance of happiness, or even a normal life. While not an overtly poor-theme play, the script focuses on economic parasitism, especially for women in Edwardian England. Clare is incapable of providing for herself financially, which causes her to stay in a marriage devoid of any kind of love or romance; this reveals the extent that women are at risk as they have no economic means to keep themselves safe.

The Fugitive casts a bleak eye on poverty as an entity intent upon stripping man of his free agency. But Clare cannot escape from her husband as she is penniless, living off the charity of others. Galsworthy's story scathingly condemns a society in which women could only find themselves as little more than toilers of the domestic hearth, bent into exhausted obedience and cowed submission because they lacked any other means by which to provide for themselves. A tragedy ensues and as Clare dies by her own hand so we are given the message that some will never be able to erase poverty and oppression from their lives.

The Fugitive is largely about Clare's fight for respect. The reality that keeps her bound to a marriage is, in fact, one of economics but also of the norms in society that prevent women from obtaining end-to-end autonomy and from having dignity. In his portrayal of Clare and her tragic end, Galsworthy illustrates his broader condemnation for a society that offers people no means to live with decency (whether due to poverty, legal evasions or social conventions).

8. CONCLUSION

The early 20th-century British national poet John Galsworthy writes plays that speak rather sharply (or crisply?) to poverty, social injustice and the human condition. Throughout *The Silver Box*, *Strife*, *Justice*,

Loyalties, *The Skin Game* and *The Fugitive* Galsworthy shows that when poverty takes from individuals it is not just the removal of physical capital but also a stripping away of honour and identity. Class is an unbridgeable chasm around which his plays revolve; while what unfolds might be social satire, the underlying message is one of compassion – the underprivileged are caught in a pitiless system and their humanity is at risk.

Galsworthy is really getting at the core of something here, the idea of dignity as represented in this play imbues all of his literature, whether it be working class pride to improve work conditions in *Strife*; or poor man simply yearning for a fair shake in *The Silver Box*; or desperate calling out for justice from *Justice*. Galsworthy's characters are oppressed by systems that are designed to oppress them: economic models, legal forms and social structures recursively reproducing limitation. Yes, the victories are tragic and the pains are far too intense; but it is not only a revelation of ancient injustices that Galsworthy plays touch — they are also an impressive call for changes, compassion, and humanity.

When Galsworthy presents the conditions and struggles of these poor and downtrodden people, he did so without cloaking it in sentiments. Instead, he paints a grounded, and often gritty picture of the ways in which poverty can destroy the basic respect for one's self and community. Still, amidst this darkness Galsworthy also champions the human spirit in what we all want — to be treated with dignity and respect; to live justly and be valued by others. His novels echo, as criticism of British society in the early 20th century and as documents on the universal significance of human dignity, equality, justice. Galsworthy's observation on the oppression of the social, judicial and economic systems that sustain poverty are obviously figures and warranting in expression today as they were back then when societies faced many similar inequalities and de-humanising aftermaths of poverty.

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