

Social Inequality and Injustice Portrayed in Galsworthy's Play *The Silver Box*

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Abstract

John Galsworthy was an English novelist and playwright. He was awarded with Noble Prize in Literature in 1932. Just as George Bernard Shaw started dealing with social problems of everyday life and focused mostly in realistic concerns of social matters. Similarly John Galsworthy also deals with social Issues like social inequality, social injustice, partial treatment of rich and poor and many social problems. The Silver Box is a three act comedy, the first play by the English writer John Galsworthy. This play was originally produced in London in 1906 and became very famous and attracted much attention. The Silver Box by Galsworthy is a social satire on unjust partiality and partial treatment. The play is an appeal for compassion and sympathy for the poor who suffer and do not get justice. The play indicts the society for its contrasting treatment of two men, Jack and Jones. Jack belongs to the affluent class and Jones belongs to the poor class. Law which is equal for all is unjust and ruthless towards the poor, helpless and weak. Galsworthy exposes the reality of the 20th century materialistic and political power dominated English Society and corrupt legal system.

Key Words: Social disparities, Social injustice, Partiality, legal system & social issues

Introduction:

This paper depicts both the characters committing same theft and both the characters are equally guilty in this play. The court makes Jack a respectable gentleman due to his wealth and social status and proves poor Jones guilty. This paper highlights the mastery of Galsworthy in portraying the reality of the 20th century English society and legal system and makes the audience to be the real judge between Jack and Jones. John Galsworthy was a social and realistic playwright. He wrote plays to instruct and then to delight. His writing reveals his temperament to bring about a social reform. He selects incidents from the society and fuses his strong and imaginative craftsmanship on them. Galsworthy's first play *The Silver Box* in 1906 marks his dramatic genius at his best.

This play is a social tragedy and covers the important aspect of modern life. The play emphasizes on the class power that diverts justice. The same theft committed by wealthy Jack and poor Jones ends with different outcome. The law favours the rich and punishes the poor. The law is made by dint of money power. In this play society and social system can be considered as the culprit. Thus the play makes our sympathy flow towards the miserable character of Jones who becomes helpless before the prejudiced legal system. The legal system favours the rich and mighty politician Jack, son of affluent Barthwick, an M.P. and punishes poor Jones and sends him jail for one year.

The play portrays that legal system becomes puppet in the hands of rich and the powerful person and becomes cruel and rigorous for the poor. Jack is a proud

young man and he is addicted to drinking. He is easy going and pleasure loving. Mr Barthwick is forced to help Jack to protect his own reputation and political career.

When Jack was in the risk of prosecution for cheating the bank, Mr. Barthwick settles it down with a draft for forty pound. When a lady in a drunken fit of resentment threatened to launch a prosecution against him, Mr. Brathwick again settles it in a silent manner by giving eight pounds for seven pounds and twelve shilling.

On contrary, Jones, a thirty year old jobless poor chap is juxtaposed to Jack. He is neither a downright villain nor a blameless hero. He is considered a mixture of good and evil, vices and virtues. Equally to Jack, he has plenty of faults and failing but his nature is rightly observed by Mrs. Jones, She says, "I think there's a great deal of good in him, Though he does treat me very hard sometimes."(Act I Scene III p.132).

Like Jack, Jones drinks recklessly and is fond of dissipation. Whenever he drinks he misbehaves and mistreats his wife. He even descends violently towards his wife and even threatens to cut her throat and drives her out at night. Under the influence of alcohol, he takes the silver box and the crimson purse to score off Jack, Jones is not a deliberate thief and he takes the silver box under the influence of alcohol .Jones's attitude is sullen and indignant. He fails to extend politeness and respect to the Magistrate. He has lost his hope in honest means of livelihood. He is willing to work hard but finds no place to work. He is an innocent victim of gross injustice, social apathy and indifference. He is just neglected by the society and he has not given a single opportunity to become an honest and responsible citizen.

It will be a serious error to consider him a wicked since he is not a downright villain. On account of his poverty he feels it a crime to have children. He feels much hurt when he finds his children hungry. Jones bitterly complains that the principle of equality before law is a legal fiction. He asserts that the legal system has become a hideous force. As there is one law for the rich and another for the poor and also he adds that money and power can easily overtake justice. He claims for an equality in law for him and Jack and expected that Jack would be also taken into task for misconduct. But the magistrate is least bothered about his words and was clear in his point to make Jack out of the case and he observes that Jones is a nuisance to the society. Galsworthy's play contrasts the unprincipled, propertied, and pragmatic upper-middle-class characters with their lower-class victims in the manipulation of the judicial system. The audience knows from the beginning about the culprits in two related cases of petty thievery, but Galsworthy creates suspense through gradual revelation of their guilt to their families. The first thief is young Jack Barthwick, down from Oxford on vacation, who, while out drinking with a female companion, steals her purse containing seven pounds. The play opens as Jack returns to the Barthwick home with Jones, a drunken, unemployed groom. When Jack passes out, Jones steals the purse and a silver cigarette box. Jack's theft is revealed to his family but is concealed in court at Jones's trial. Jones is disappointed since the rich Jack is left free and he is condemned with a month of rigorous imprisonment.

Conclusion:

Galsworthy portrays the legal system of justice which allows the guilty Jack to go

scot free and the helpless Jones to a month of hard labour leaving his wife and children to suffer. Thus the play The

Silver Box dramatizes the controversial social question of the unequal treatment of the rich and the poor.

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