

Invisible Forces, Visible Suffering in John Galsworthy's Plays.

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Abstract

John Galsworthy is a pure artist and dramatist. Through a well-contrived plot, he holds a mirror to the life around him and presents men and manners with great fidelity, without distortion or idealisation. Galsworthy's dramatic method is objective and detached, allowing no intrusion of his personality to colour the characters or events. He is a serious critic of life, with his attention fixed upon the victims of society. His major characters are social victims, and tragedy is his chief forte. He eliminates supernatural agencies and heroic figures from his plays. His chief character is usually a weak individual who is overwhelmed by powerful social forces that grind him to pieces. He depicts the tragic social conditions prevailing in different walks of life. His plays portray the sad spectacle of tremendous human suffering. Although his characters do not always die, they lead lives of terrible agony, and therefore there remains hope that such suffering can be prevented.

Keywords: Divine, Patricide, Incest, Destiny, Convention, Insight, Crime, Pity, Compassion, Tragedy, Tragic Atmosphere, Conflict, Social Institutions, Dramatic Irony, Human Suffering, Social Forces, Justice, Prison System, Capital and Labour, Human Understanding, Sympathy.

Galsworthy cast all his plays in the tragic mould, whereas Shaw made his mark as a writer of comedies. Shaw was a laughing philosopher, while Galsworthy specialized in tragedies. Five of his plays end with the death of the principal character: *Justice*, *The Fugitive*, *The Mob*, *Loyalties*, and *Old English*. In several other plays, the principal character does not die but undergoes immense suffering. These include *The Silver Box*, *Strife*, *The Skin Game*, *The Pigeon*, *A Family Man*, *Windows*, *The Eldest Son*, *The Forest*, and *A Bit of Love*. Even his comedies, such as *Joy* and *Foundations*, are not entirely free from a tragic atmosphere. The earliest writers of tragedy were the Greeks. Their tragedies introduced heroes possessing extraordinary personality and character. Such heroes incurred the wrath of the gods by committing either a conscious or an unconscious sin. As punishment, the gods subjected them to terrible suffering. Although these heroes struggled bravely against their fate, they were ultimately crushed by divine power. Thus, Oedipus, in complete ignorance, killed his own father and married his mother. In doing so, he violated the divine laws prohibiting patricide and incest. Consequently, the gods punished him severely.

In Greek tragedy, suffering was caused by destiny or the anger of the gods. We admire the hero for his courageous struggle and experience awe and terror when such an outstanding personality is ultimately defeated by fate. Galsworthy, however, presents a different conception of tragedy. According to him, the life of an ordinary labourer is as important as that of a king or a prince. The labourer, or any other individual in Galsworthy's plays, does not merely stand as an individual; rather, he represents an entire class or group of people. This representative quality enhances the significance of his character. Galsworthy possesses a profound understanding of human life and draws his characters with remarkable insight and psychological depth. They are ordinary human beings in whom we can easily recognize ourselves. Most of them are average people, and we sympathize deeply with them when they become victims of circumstances. Their suffering becomes our own.

In Galsworthy's social tragedies, the conflict exists between the individual and a social institution. It is an unequal struggle in which the weak individual is inevitably overwhelmed by powerful social forces. Characters such as Jones, Falder, Dancy, Ruth, Freda, Chloe, and Roberts are all comparatively weak individuals who are crushed when confronted by these overwhelming forces. In *The Silver Box*, for example, the machinery of law mercilessly destroys the Jones family. As one critic observes: "*The real villain is neither Jones nor Jack Barthwick but the judicial system, for which we are all responsible. The audience itself stands in the dock, confronted with the crime of having approved such a system.*"

In *Strife*, the conflict is between capital and labour. In *The Skin Game*, it is between the landed aristocracy and the manufacturing class. In *Loyalties*, the conflict arises from competing loyalties. Thus, throughout Galsworthy's plays, the central conflict is between powerful social institutions and the helpless individuals caught within them. In the conflict between social forces, insignificant individuals are often crushed, resulting in

tremendous human waste. Poor Chloe is destroyed in the conflict between the aristocracy and the industrial magnates. Thousands of labourers' families suffer from hunger and cold, while Mrs. Roberts dies as a result of the struggle between capital and labour. Likewise, the insensitive legal system, which fails to distinguish between a hardened criminal and a social weakling, together with the cruel prison system that subjects prisoners to solitary confinement, ruins Falder's life. Thus, Galsworthy's tragedies portray the tragic waste of precious human lives caused by the operation of inhuman and invisible social forces.

Galsworthy also employs dramatic irony with remarkable effectiveness. It is deeply ironic that the machinery of justice, which was originally established to protect the poor and the weak, instead safeguards the interests of the rich and powerful while crushing those it was meant to defend. In *Strife*, after five months of a bitter strike that causes starvation among the workers and heavy losses to the employers, an agreement is finally reached. Ironically, this agreement is exactly the same as the one that had been proposed before the strike began. Similarly, in *Escape*, a man who escapes from prison before completing his sentence is welcomed by society, whereas another man who honestly serves his full term continues to suffer social rejection. It is equally ironic that, despite humanity's inherent sense of justice and fair play, countless innocent people continue to experience sorrow, suffering, and even tragic death. Another striking irony is that those responsible for enforcing the laws of society are often sincere, honest, and dutiful individuals. Nevertheless, their actions unintentionally contribute to the destruction of countless innocent lives.

The themes of Galsworthy's tragedies are drawn directly from the life around him. Because of his close association with the legal profession, nearly ten of his plays deal with the administration of justice. *Strife* examines the conflict between capital and labour, while *The Pigeon* exposes the shortcomings of shelter homes and the Poor Law. Galsworthy also derives themes from family relationships, such as the loyalty and conflict between husband and wife, a woman's struggle to escape an unhappy marriage, and the rebellion of youth against parental authority. In addition, he portrays the tragic lives of drunkards, criminals, and prostitutes whose lives have been ruined by the rigid laws and conventions of society. He also explores conflicts arising from differences of class, caste, and religion. In all these situations, Galsworthy finds material for powerful social tragedies.

Galsworthy presents the sorrowful spectacle of immense human suffering in the lives of ordinary men and women. His characters do not always die; instead, they endure lives filled with pain and misery. Their collective suffering gives his social tragedies their profound emotional significance. Unlike the tragedies of ancient Greece, where suffering was regarded as the unavoidable consequence of fate or the anger of the gods, Galsworthy's social tragedies arise from human folly and defective social institutions. Since these causes are man-made, there is hope that such suffering can be prevented. Most of the hardships of life can be avoided through greater human understanding, compassion, and a sympathetic approach to social problems. Some critics believe that Galsworthy's tragic appeal is less powerful than that of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. According to them, while the great tragedies of the past inspire both awe and terror, Galsworthy's plays evoke mainly pity and compassion. Other critics, however, argue that the struggles of modern individuals against unjust social institutions are just as moving as the struggles of ancient heroes against fate and the gods. In this context, Professor Nicoll's opinion deserves special attention: "Judged by the standards of Greek and Elizabethan drama, Galsworthy's plays are not high tragedies. There is no single dominant hero rising above his fellow men." However, modern drama cannot be judged solely by the standards of the past. Galsworthy's plays possess genuine tragic strength. We do not merely pity Falder; rather, we stand in awe before the relentless and impersonal forces of justice that destroy him. The tragic atmosphere pervades the play, and the unseen forces of modern society become the true Fates against which helpless human beings struggle in vain.

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