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Galsworthy's the silver box as a problem play

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Abstract

Problem play, type of drama that developed in the 19th century to deal with controversial social issues in a realistic manner, to expose social ills and to stimulate thought and discussion on the part of the audience. In the play 'Silver box' Galsworthy has dealt with the problem of underdogs. Thus this play has themes like Social injustice, bias, corruption, discrimination, humiliation, exploitation and so on. Thus Galsworthy is the Great humanist full of intimate pity for human suffering. Galsworthy stands for fair play, human understanding and fellow feeling.

Keywords: Silver box, Galsworthy, corruption, discrimination, humiliation, exploitation

Introduction

John Galsworthy's original title for the silver box was 'The Cigarette Box'. Both essentially mean something an expensive cigarette case. It is an essential thing in the plot. The entire story revolves around it. We see the cigarette box dominates the events from cover to cover. All conflict and suffering arise from it. The word silver gives to the title that colour of a class struggle between the rich and the poor. Silver is the symbol of riches.

John Galsworthy's drama 'The Silver box' has a three act structure and is well written to captivate the audience. The play was considered much ahead of itself and it's times the social inequality through a different prism was widely appreciated. 'The Silver box' is a powerful and bitter play through the characters of James, Jones. John Galsworthy criticizes the British society in which the rich are favoured by law and injustice is done to the poor, law grinds the poor and rich men rule the law. The play is an appeal for compassion and sympathy for the poor who invariably suffers. It indicts the society for its contrasting treatment of two men Jack and Jones, the one belonging to the affluent section and the other to the vertically opposite. Many of John Galsworthy's plays are concerned with the issues, questions, controversies of the England of his time, thus his play 'Strife' deals with the conflict between labour and capital. 'The Mob' is a study of the eternal conflict between loyalty to a principle and the need to compromise for worldly reasons.

The play 'Silver box' depicts the clash between upper classes and the lower classes, but no solution is offered. But thinking people in a play house, intelligent readers, in a study realise how true to life are the issues presented, realise how cruel and heartless people can be and how dark people can be, how different, passive irresponsible others can be. They then wonder what can be done to make the world a better place to live. In the play John Barwick and Mrs Barwick are not just a man and his wife. They are also members of the so called upper classes and when they face crisis, their instincts are for the self-presentation and whatever uneasiness of conscience and compunction they feel as individuals towards those who are unjustly acting against, are satisfied in the interest of preserving the prestige of their class. Their general feeling is the lower classes are out to conspire against them, as for Jack, his behaviour is typical of the only son of a rich family, he is thoughtless irresponsible and he has never given up thought to servants except to say Marlowe was a decent fellow. Irresponsible as he is yet submissive to his parents and would do anything they ask him to do if thereby he could escape trouble. We see how potentially the Barwicks are geared for a clash with those of a lower station.

Jones is an unemployed workman. He is also representative of the formidable class, the unemployed poor, his behaviour is common with that of members of that class, he takes part in demonstration against the government is resentful towards the idle rich like Jack who

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doesn't work yet has all he wants and does what he want. And like other unemployed men who are bitter about so many things he spends is money on drink and is unkind to his wife but he is also an individual basically honest, stealing because of the circumstance in which he is placed by Jack, and has really regard for his wife. Anyway he is the member of the labour class prepared to fight the rich. Mrs Jones is a point of rest in the conflict between the two classes. She is a servant fully conscious of all the hardships suffered by those of her class, suffered by her husband but bearing them silently. At the same time she is respectful, obedient to authority, and utters not one word of complaint against the rich as her husband does.

In the conflict that takes place between the two classes, the upper class wins, successfully preventing all the unsavoury facts about Jack from coming out. Jones has no advocate to speak for him, and all the facts about his action come out and he is sentenced to imprisonment. And Mrs Jones, whom we do not think of as a member of a class but as an individual suffers a tragic fate, though she is absolutely innocent of any crime innocent of any harsh word uttered the privileged people who have wronged her.

The problem that Galsworthy presents through his play is: the upper classes possess power, money, high principles of morality and justice, and yet why do they compromise these principles when they confront weaker setion? The working class when they suffering hardships? Can they be allowed to become a law unto themselves? What role must government and parliament, play in tackling the problems of poverty, unemployment, drunkenness? Galsworthy wrote the play in the early years of this century. The fact that some progress has been made in solving this problems, shows what effect plays like Galsworthy's have had on all thinking minds.

We must not imagine that the problem play, because it is described as a play of ideas, has something abstract about it or that it is a work in which we have lifeless symbols, each standing for a particular idea. It is not an allegory. The problem play is rooted in reality, in real-life situations, with people of the world we are familiar with reacting each in his or her own way in those situations. In fact, as in a play like *The Silver Box*, as we read or view it, we are hardly aware of problems, findino the character and the plot interesting in themselves. In the opening scene, we wonder who the stranger is whom Jack brings into the house, and who the mysterious girl is whom Jack raves against and against whom he took revenge by taking away her reticule, within which is the crimson silk purse. And how is the "mystery" of "*The Silver Box*" going to be solved? is the innocent Mrs. Jones going to pay for the sin to her husband? Though the Barthwicks and Jack do not make a favourable impression on us, still as gentlemen won't they be fair to their servants? And when the trial opens, we watch its progress with bated breath wondering whether those who have been trying to escape will really escape.

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