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## Pathos and Social Tragedy in John Galsworthy's Silver Box

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**Abstract:** Sociological criticism is based on the fact that there is a vital relationship between art and society in which the artist lives. The time and space in which the artist is fixed shape his thinking and genius. Sociological critics pay attention to the social milieu and the extent and the manner in which the artist responds to it. Sociological approach shows how literature mirrors social conditions or how social conditions affect a writer's thinking. This paper explores how Galsworthy reflects the abominable defects in Victorian Society in England in his play *The Silver Box*.

**Keywords:** Sociological Criticism, Art, Society, Artist, Time, Space, Social Milieu, Literature, Galsworthy, Victorian Society.

## Pathos and Social Tragedy in John Galsworthy's Silver Box

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*"Literature is not only the effect of social causes; it is also the cause of social effects".*

*Harry Levin*

Sociological Criticism is not a twentieth century development. It dates back to the eighteenth century when Vice came out with a perspective study of the social conditions in Greece which went into the composition of Homer's epics. The nineteenth century brought to light two eminent sociological critics, the German Herder and the Frenchman, Taine. Taine stressed the importance of three forces – 'the race, the milieu, and the moment' acting on the artist. By 'race', Taine means the hereditary temperament and disposition of people. By 'milieu' he means the combined influence of surroundings, climate, physical environment, political institutions, social conditions, and the like. By 'moment', Taine means the spirit of the period, or the particular stage of national development which has been reached at a particular point of time.

According to Allardyce Nicoll “ ‘*The Silver Box*’ deals with the old adage that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. It is not, however, that Jack Barthwick, the happily born thief, is not thoroughly a rascal, as that he finds himself in circumstances over which he has no control. During the police- court scene, when the magistrate tells Jones, the thief of no connexions and no money, that he is a nuisance to the community, Jack Barthwick leans from his seat and cries, ‘Dad! that is what you said to me!’ Both father and son realize perfectly that Jones is being badly treated, that he and Jack should, in a just society, have received the same punishment ; but circumstances will it otherwise. The one is a rich man’s son; the other is a nobody. Society, that invisible presence, determines that the rich shall be preferred to the poor.” (3) It is true, Irony is the warp and woof of this play. Irony in the life of people and social forces working against them is patent in this play . There is considerable irony in the presentation of the system of Law and justice that strikes at the very root and structure of the social life. Legal Justice is a big hoax and a hideous mockery. In the form of Justice, the poor are crushed. What is administered as justice in the law courts is gross injustice, and that is the Irony of our social and legal life. The words of Jones at the conclusion of the play regarding the judgement of the magisterate show the bitter irony of the legal system. His words are intensely ironical.

According to F.W. Chandler “ The satire of ‘*The Silver Box*’ is directed at the difference in treatment accorded by the courts to the rich and the poor. A gilded fool and a labouring man do the same things. The gilded fool is protected from legal punishment by his father, whereas the labourer is hauled to the court, reprimanded by the judge and sent to jail. In the course of the Labourer’s trial, the gay youth saves himself by lying, with connivance of his counsel and his moral father, a member of parliament. The labourer, not so assisted, tells the truth and suffers for it.” (4) It is evident, a social tragedy in particular for Jones and his family. Law enters this play as a mighty legal force, like the villain in a Shakespearean tragedy. The Legal machinery is corrupt and it brings tragedy in the family of Jones. Moreover, as a social tragedy “*The Silver Box*” is concerned not with the facts and fortunes of mighty heroes in the Shakespearean tragedy. It is the tragedy of ordinary, common place men and women in society. The pathetic life of livens and his two daughters, the sadness and misery in the life of Jones, and the miserable life of Mrs. Jones present the spectacle of tragedy in this play.

According to Hermon Ould “ The parallelism of *The Silver Box*’ ,..... how exact it is and yet how naturally it works! The desire of the author was to show that the law, although nominally unbiased, bears more hardly on the poor than on the rich. He interweaves the fortunes of the two families: the middle-class Barthwicks and the lower-class Joneses. The son of Mrs. Barthwick, being drunk, takes the reticule of a street girl, for fun to score off her. The husband of Mrs. Jones, being drunk, takes a silver cigarette box from the sitting room of the Barthwicks, out of spite. The juxtaposition of these two purloinings was exactly what Galsworthy needed to enable him to develop his theme.....” (5) It is true, the play is said to be a social tragedy full of deep pathetic touches that move one’s heart and touch the feelings of sympathy and pity for the downtrodden and crushed people in the society. The two characters who evoke the greatest sympathy are Mrs. Jones and Jones, and out of these two our sympathy goes out for Mrs. Jones, Jones is punished by the magistrate for assaulting snow. He is sent behind the bars for a month, and this sentence on Jones creates untold misery and suffering for Mrs. Jones. She is turned out of service, and with apparently no means of earning, she has

nothing but starvation and suffering for her three children and herself. The state of Mrs. Jones' life wrings tears and the readers bemoan the tragic spectacle of life presented by the vicious system of justice that is unduly harsh on Jones and his wife. That is the social tragedy in *The Silver Box*.

According to Leon Schalit "The plot is the struggle of an individual against society, the vain onslaughts of a rebel against a closed phalanx. No less than ten of his dramas are in some way connected with justice and in six of them, a criminal case with its essential thrills and pursuit of the law-breaker is used to develop the character, and work out the dominant ideas. (6) It is true, the dramas of John Galsworthy are written with a definite purpose. Though he was an artist who believed in the principles of objectivity, he could not believe that dramas should be written just for the purpose of recreation or relaxation. He wrote his plays to propagate some of his ideas to remove the evils running rampant in the society and thus strike at the very root of the social structure. Galsworthy always had a purpose behind the seeming facade of art in his plays. He was categorically of the opinion, "A Drama must be so shaped as to have a spire of meaning. Every grouping of life and character has its inherent moral; and the business of the dramatist is so to pose the group as to bring that moral poignantly to the light of the day." In this play the dramatist deals with certain social problems with the zeal of a reformer and he pleads for better sense in the dealing of these problems.

According to J.W Cunliffe "The play (*The Silver Box*) deliberately attempts a formal symmetry which is one of Galsworthy's favourite dramatic devices. Jones, an "out-of-work", has stolen in a drunken fit of resentment from John Barthwick, the idle son of a wealthy Liberal M.P., a purse of crimson silk which Jack in a drunken fit of a resentment has stolen from "an unknown lady, from beyond." The real effect of the play consists in the contrast between the Barthwick household, purse-proud and pampered, and the Jones's family, driven to separation by poverty. Mrs. Jones who furnishes the connection between the two by acting as charwoman in the Barthwick house, is an admirable character study, very effective on the stage. (7) It is evident, *The Silver Box* presents a wide contrast between two classes of people, the rich and the poor. Galsworthy has given a peep into two kinds of 'lives,' those of the rich, and those of the poor. In the play it distinguishes the Barthwick Household, and Jones's family, and after reading this play it is easy to tabulate the two modes of human living. Mrs. Jones is a very honest woman. Thought of theft never comes to her mind. She does not believe in pocketing other people's money quietly and she is strongly opposed to the idea of pilfering other people's things. When she is arrested by Snow, she pleads complete innocence in the matter and rightly too for she is not at all implicated in the theft of Silver Box. She is made the victim of gross injustice. She is honourably acquitted but her husband is arrested, and the case of the silver box penalizes her in life.

According to Frank Swinnerton "He (Galsworthy) had been born into a comfortable class, and he found members of that class intolerably less sensitive to the evils which he all saw about. Like every other English Moralist, he cried out upon the English hypocrisy. He arraigned his class for using every advantage which wealth and the British Legal system provided. When he first went into the theatre, it was to draw a pointed contrast between the lot of a youngman of good family and a working man bote of whom, when drunk, had committed theft.( Of *The Silver Box*) ". (8) It is true, Galsworthy remained an ardent advocate of realism to the end of his life.

Addressing himself to the question of the correlation between truth and beauty in a work of art, Galsworthy declares that “the artist who creates what is living and true has achieved beauty also,” displays striking perspicacity in everything that concerns mass culture. He observes with alarm the attack made by the media on man, on the book, on true knowledge. His ideal of the human being presupposed the full development of the individual’s spiritual powers. He knew from his own experience that people constantly strive to learn more about themselves and their environment, and in art he saw the primary means of attaining understanding between people.

Galsworthy’s art was life- affirming and accessible to all. A Firm believer in the ultimate triumph of reason and beauty as the property of all, Galsworthy refused to accept absence of humanistic ideals, negation of form and composition, exaltation of chance and formlessness. And he had the courage of his convictions.

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