Galsworthy is a great realistic writer. His realism should not be confused with the photographic representation of life. His realistic plays are poignantly shaped and inspired by high intention and imagination. He dealt with social reality like a social reformer. The social problem was the raw stuff of realism, a means through which he made his communication, evaluation and expression, to a large extent his imagination is enlivened by constructive imagination. He gave impressive close ups of life at its most damnable, but he had the artist’s love of design, his eye for detail, his plays deal with contrasts. His role as a reformer and philanthropist did not let him stray into the magic world of fancy or idea.

Galsworthy is as relentlessly realistic in almost all his plays, as in his novels, and short stories. He shows us things visualized through his temperament, not as many people would prefer to see them. An incorruptible lover of truth, he attempts to shape all his plots and problems with the greatest impartiality, allowing both sides to air their opinions and throwing light on their ideas in all possible ways.

For him the task lies in the unrolling of the problem, not in its solution. The unrolling of the problem should serve to make us think and reflect, to make us realise, to awaken our interest in what is hitherto unknown to us, or viewed in a wrong light.

Galsworthy himself discusses his theory of realism. Analyzing the term “realism,” he says:
To me ... the words realism, realistic, have no longer reference to technique for which the words naturalism, naturalistic, serve far better. Nor have they to do with the question of imaginative power – as much demanded by realism as by romanticism. For me, a realist is by no means tied to the naturalistic technique – he may be poetic, idealistic, fantastic, and impressionistic anything but -- romantic; that, in so far as he is a realist, he cannot be. The word, in fact, characterises that artist whose temperamental pre-occupation is with the revelation of the actual inter-relating spirit of life, character, and thought, with a view to enlighten himself and others; as distinguished from the artist whom I call romantic -- whose temperamental purpose is the invention of tale or design with a view to delight himself and others. It is a question of temperamental antecedent motive in the artist, and nothing more.²

Galsworthy’s realism emerges primarily in two ways – in his theme and in characterization. All the plays of Galsworthy’s are sociological plays. He depicts real society in all its aspects. He wrote his plays with a definite purpose. His purpose was to expose the shortcomings and evils of the existing social institutions. This could not have been achieved unless he presented a realistic picture of social life and institutions. He possessed a remarkable power of objective detachment in his portrayal of society. He came under the influence of the French naturalism. He strived to present the truth without favour of prejudice. Each of his plays deals with a realistic social problem. Galsworthy
believed that “The great duty of the dramatist is to present life as it really is. A true story, if told sincerely, is the strongest moral argument that can be put on the stage. It is the business of the dramatist so to present the characters in his picture of life that the inherent moral is brought to light without any lecturing on his part”\(^3\) and that “Moral codes in themselves are, after all, not lasting, but a true picture of life is. A man may preach a strong lesson in a play which may exist for a day, but if he succeeds in presenting real life itself in such a manner as to carry with it a certain moral inspiration, the force of the message need never be lost, for a new interpretation to fit the spirit of the time can renew its vigor and power.”\(^4\)

John Galsworthy has undoubtedly succeeded in presenting real life. It is this that makes him so thoroughly human and universal.

*The Silver Box* exposes the great social evil that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. *Strife* presents the endless conflict between workers and the employers. *The Pigeon* brings out the question of the vagabonds and the poor. In *The Eldest Son* it is the problem of morality applied to the rich and poor. *The Fugitive* treats of women’s position in social life. The spirit of the crowd and idealism dominate *The Mob*. *Loyalties* is a study in social pride and social conventions. *Justice* exposes the evils and shortcomings of prison system and judiciary. Not only are his themes realistic, but his treatment of those themes is equally realistic as he presents both the sides with objective
detachment. In The Strife, he presents the cause of both the workers and the employers with detached fidelity and truth. While writing Justice, he interviewed convicts, who had experienced months of solitary confinement, but he got the views also of prison governors and wardens, and these too were stated with complete disinterestedness. His legal knowledge came in good stead in exposing the shortcomings of the system of law and judiciary. Galsworthy’s plays realistically describe modern society and its problems. He totally eschewed the romantic element in his presentation of problems. Ideas, institutions, morality, class interests, and social forces from its main theme. Many of Galsworthy’s plays are based on an inexorable incompatibility between the justice of society and what is actually just. He also handled definite problems of marriage, of sex relationship, of labour disputes, of the administration, of the law, of solitary confinement, but for him the individual problem leads always to the general relations between individuals within the social organism. He suggested no practical reform, though reform appeared in his constant indication of existing wrongs. His solution was not practical but ethical. The source of evil for him laid in failure of imagination and sympathy. His character-portrayal is equally realistic. He draws his characters from his real experience of persons or situations around him. His characters are therefore living human beings, whom we can meet any day in life. All his characters even the heroes are ordinary men possessed of common human weaknesses and frailties.
Most of his characters are typically Englishmen. They have English traits. They are more types than individuals. Dancy is a typical whimsical military man, Hillchrist represents the landed nobility, Hornblower is a modern capitalist, Falder is a common clerk who represents the modern ordinary middle-class persons, romantic in nature and suffering from want of money. Galsworthy is thus a realistic artist. He has the naturalism of Zola and realism of Turgenev. To these he adds his own sympathetic view with a humanitarian zeal. To read his plays is therefore to study all the prominent English social institutions of his day.

Drama has been widely acclaimed as a positive medium for mirroring society; hence the popular view that “drama is a representation of life.” So, while drama entertains, it also teaches and informs. This powerful attribute of drama has been employed by playwrights over the ages to make constructive commentaries on the happenings in society and thus effect some positive changes in man and his environment.

John Galsworthy’s conception of drama is mainly based on realism and a general sense of morality. He believed that drama is a meaningful art form, capable of stirring the mind and bringing awareness of noble principles in life. It is a medium through which a dramatist can project a life as he sees it. He held firmly that the realistic depiction of contemporary life through drama would serve a useful purpose. It would make people realize their shortcomings, awaken in them a sense of guilt.
and prepare them to change the defective structure of society. With such a noble purpose in him, Galsworthy took to playwriting. He never, for a moment, thought that drama was merely an instrument of cheap entertainment. Every play of Galsworthy is shaped so as to have a spire of meaning. A problem -- social, economic, domestic or personal – forms the canvas of the Galsworthy plays. On this canvas painted the figures of flesh and blood characters and they are so posed as to bring the inherent moral poignantly to the light of day. Galsworthy intended to disturb the complacent people of his time and shake them from their slumber. He wanted to bring to light the evils in the society so as to bring about a reasonable change in the outdated social structure of the day. The social thinker in Galsworthy employs drama to serve this purpose and the humanitarian in him appeals for benevolence, tolerance, and understanding.

Galsworthy uses drama to comment on the society of his times. He uses drama to inform, educate, and arouse the consciousness of individuals in society with a view to making them aware of their responsibilities as members of society whose duty it is take their destinies in their hands and make the world a better place. Galsworthy is a critic and an interpreter of contemporary English life. In his plays we have a threadbare discussion of the problems of marriage, sex relationship, labour disputes, administration of law, solitary confinement, caste or class prejudice. These social problems are treated by Galsworthy
in the context of contemporary society and social relationships. He deals with the problems of life with impartiality. He is an artist who takes a detached view of the problems he deals with, and examines them in all their facets. He maintained his impartiality so well that his plays seem inconclusive. There is no finality about them, no solutions are suggested.

*The Silver Box* explores the way class influences justice, revealing how similar crimes committed by rich and poor result in dissimilar outcomes when the rich manipulate the legal system to their advantage. In the play the tragedy is caused by the ruthless machinery of Law. The real criminal is the British social and judicial system. The power of wealth diverts the course of Justice. It saves the rich and crushes the downtrodden, poor, and weak destitute. Here we see the spectacle of machinery of law and justice inflicting misery and even injustice upon innocent people.

*The Silver Box* is a real masterpiece. It is a triumph of the naturalistic technique in drama. In this play there is no fault in the characters. The fault lies with the British socioeconomic system and the legal procedures that England has devised for the disposal of disputes. The play shows that the problem can be solved by the exercise of some imagination and sympathy. Thus *The Silver Box* is undoubtedly a great social tragedy.

*Escape*, published in 1926, has some surface likeness to *Justice*, published in 1910. Both deal with convicts who have been wrongfully
imprisoned. But a comparison of the two plays brings out one very remarkable point of difference. The man who evades the demands of justice and escapes from prison before his time is received by the world with open arms; the man who fulfils the demands of justice and remains in prison till he has expiated his offence is cold-shouldered by the world, and further punishments are heaped upon him. In *Escape* Galsworthy shows the cruelty of society towards a person who comes out of prison after completing his term. Society treats an escaped convict in a better manner.

If the play is “about” anything at all, its purpose is surely to give expression to the difference between law and justice. The law decreed that streets should be “clean” and free from vice: but was it just for a policeman to lurk, in plain clothes, to pounce on a girl who did nothing more than invite a young man to visit her? It was against the law to take a man’s life; but was it just to imprison a man for five years in Dartmoor -- England’s most forbidding top-security prison -- because he had done what a gentleman had always considered it his duty to do: to protect a defenceless woman? Certainly, the prison regime was less hard in 1926, when the food served was fit for humans, and the prisoners had no longer had to wear a uniform with arrows printed on it. All the same, Matt feels acutely the injustice of his punishment, and we are asked to share something of that feeling.
We meet the extremes of law and justice in the persons, respectively, of Grace and Dora; and in the persons of the lady in episode III and the Shopkeeper in episode V. All have heard of the Captain Denant case, and all have fixed opinions about his guilt and innocence. “There is always a fuss made about the Law,” says the Shopkeeper. He means by this that people are too “soft on crime” and too soft-hearted towards criminals. If he and his sister had their way, prostitutes would be cleared from public parks, and locked away so that they could not tempt young men; and people found guilty of unlawful killing would be hanged. The Law, as far as the Shopkeeper, his sister, and Miss Grace are concerned, is all about punishment -- and rather stiff punishment at that. The Lady, the Old Gentleman in episode IV, Miss Dora, and the Parson are all aware that when the law works as if it was a machine, injustice is done. Justice is the human factor in the workings of the law; it takes human weakness into account; it examines motives; and it leaves room for compassion. Galsworthy’s earlier play, Justice, first performed in 1910, had shown how, when the law is not tempered with justice, it can destroy whomsoever is its victim; and the play showed especially, how a man’s spirit can be broken by a spell in person— and by solitary confinement, in particular. Galsworthy plainly wishes the reader to take sides with Matt against the Shopkeeper, and the Farmer, and the Constable, and other worthy fools in positions of petty authority, just as he had wanted us to side with Falder the clerk,
against his hard-hearted employer in *Justice*. He wants the reader to wish that Matt might escape, as he had escaped from the Germans in the war, yet he puts the audience in the same question as the Parson: Ought we to wish that a man convicted by due process of law should go free?

In *Justice* there is not a single evil character. But once the spirit of the law has been invoked, the wheels of the machine of Justice grind Falder to bits. Nobody has any evil intention but there is tremendous suffering and a promising life is completely wasted. Galsworthy’s experience of the law courts also showed him that the judges only interpret the laws and do not provide real justice to the people. The law enforcing bodies have no human touch. They do not differentiate between a hardened criminal and a weak individual who has committed a minor crime in a moment of stress. Solitary confinement is a particularly cruel form of punishment for a weak individual. This is the theme of *Justice*. In writing this play Galsworthy wanted to be so truthful that before writing the prison scenes he interviewed convicts who had been kept in solitary confinement for some months. He also interviewed prison governors and warders. His scenes in this play are, therefore, absolutely realistic. The real criminal is not the forger but the legal and the prison systems of British society. Winston Churchill, A Home Secretary, who was later to become England’s most famous personality, was so moved as he sat watching the drama *Justice*, and was so conscious of the fact that all around him were similarly moved,
that within a short time he abolished the indiscriminate practice of penal solitary confinement. “Churchill also reduced the amount of time that prisoners could spend in solitary confinement at the beginning of their sentences. A period of up to nine months was reduced to one month for the majority of the prisoners and three months for recidivists (repeat offenders). Churchill was spurred on in this decision by seeing John Galsworthy’s play Justice, the central protagonist in which was imprisoned, humiliated and eventually destroyed by his experience of solitary confinement. Finally he insisted on the provision of concerts and lectures within prisons and improved the help given to prisoners after their release.”

Though the Marxian philosophy was several decades old no playwright had explicitly and overtly dramatized the conflict between the capitalists and the working classes as in Strife. Galsworthy found Marx's analysis of the origin and growth of the capitalist class, his description of the exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class, in a word Marxian dialectics, so exciting that he wrote plays with the Marxian theme. Without abandoning the realistic medium, Galsworthy skillfully presents the class conflict.

Strife is the eternal element in human nature that goes on fighting because fighters must fight long after what they fight for is conceded or abandoned. But an even more striking quality was again the prophetic foresight. Strife is the drama of an industrial strike. It was written before
the great strike of 1911, much more before that of 1926. It did not record industrial history; it foretold it.

In *Strife* we see the conflict between Capital and Labour. This conflict in Trenartha Tin Plate Works goes on for four long months. The company loses 50,000 pounds and the families of the workers shiver in the cold and go without proper food and Mrs. Roberts dies. He has given his all for the cause. Finally the dispute is settled on the very terms which both sides had rejected four months earlier. There has been unnecessary loss and suffering. In the clash between these forces, each led by extremists, thousands of families of poor labourers suffer untold hardships. The clash of powerful forces causes the waste of innocent lives.

Galsworthy saw that in a industrialized country like England conflicts between capital and labour are very common. *Strife* is based on his observations of the causes of these conflicts and how they affected different classes of peoples. Galsworthy felt that extremism in individuals and groups is responsible for conflicts. A sympathetic understanding of each other’s point of view can solve the problem and avoid needless suffering.

The play *Loyalties* shows the loyalties of several characters: loyalty to one’s race, loyalty to a friend and army officer, loyalty of a wife to her husband, and loyalty of a solicitor to his profession and to one’s family. It also deals with caste feeling. Mankind is divided into
different racial, social, political, religious, and economic communities and interests. Each one has a feeling that s/he belongs to a higher class than others. Clashes between communities and classes are inevitable. These conflicts provided Galsworthy with material for several of his tragedies.

In *Loyalties* the conflict is brought about by race prejudice. The theft committed by Dancy in a mad moment was not a serious matter. Canynge and Winsor know that he has done it. They could have persuaded him to return the money and apologize to De Levis. But Dancy is their friend and a Christian and De Levis is a Jew. Because of their class prejudice they ignore the demands of truth and justice and shield Dancy. But they cannot help him when his guilt is proved. He escapes punishment only by shooting himself. His innocent and devoted wife is left to suffer for the rest of her life. Here we see the tragic consequences of sacrificing justice, right and truth for the sake of a false obligation to one’s social class and loyalty to one’s own group. Dancy has no moral conflict in his mind. His conscience does not prick him either before or after the crime. Dancy’s friends are not true friends. Instead of making him conscious of his mistake, they encourage him to fight a legal battle. The result is disastrous to Dancy.

Thus Galsworthy’s idea is that loyalty towards one’s friend is a virtue. But we should not support our friends in their wrong actions. If they are doing something wrong, we should warn them and advise them to come to the right path. Blind, unquestioning loyalty in disregard of
moral principles leads to disaster. Loyalty by itself is not enough. Our loyalty to our friends should not make us forget our loyalty to justice and truth.

*The Eldest Son* exposes the repression of women in the family and society and insists that young men take responsibility for women they impregnate. *The Eldest Son* is an admirable play in which the subject of the lady’s maid made pregnant by the son of the aristocratic family is treated in a highly civilized, entirely unmelodramatic way: everyone behaves decently, and the girl shows that she is no less a lady, no less moved by the Edwardian ideal of moral excellence, than her unconventionally fair and generous mistress. *The Eldest Son* is probably the most perfect of Galsworthy’s plays as an acting piece. Its terse, clear-cut lines, of which no word was superfluous, spoken across a county-house scene on the morning of the meet, make it the first entertainment he ever provided. Choleric Sir William Cheshire tells his junior gamekeeper to marry the village girl who is to bear their baby. He returns from the kill to be told that his heir, Bill Cheshire, stands in the same position regarding Freda Studdenham, Lady Cheshire’s maid and the head-keeper’s daughter. Bill offers to marry her and go to Canada. Freda solves the impossible situation by declining the offer. A sensation of relief is seen in William Cheshire and his wife. The irony lies in the conclusion: instead of being rewarded by marriage out of her class, Freda shows her quality and strength in refusing her lover’s offer.
The Skin Game, which moves to a grim and very bitter conclusion, is probably the best of the later plays. Here Galsworthy’s celebrated objectivity and detachment are certainly to be found more in technique than in content. Self-examination has contributed to the conflict between the gentleman and the lady that runs under the more overt conflict between a still-feudal aristocracy and the brash new rich industrialist. When the gentleman will not fight—as hard as Sir Anthony in Strife—the lady must, and neither Hillcrist nor his young daughter has the heart, in the end, to let her carry the blame. In the relationship between Hillcrist and his wife, he allows her to master him and force him into a dirty and destructive campaign to keep their place. There is here some parallel to the relationship between young Jolyon and Irene at the end of Galsworthy’s novel To Let, though Mrs. Hillcrist is denied the latter’s saving grace of suffering.

The Fugitive deals with marital relationships. Clare’s helplessness and her husband’s obstinacy, the conflict between freedom and coercion ending in a disastrous consequence, is dramatized in the play. Clare Dedmond is first shown to us chafing under a marriage yoke that galls her; she and her husband are quite unsuited to each other spiritually, but George Dedmond has too much respect for his proprietary rights to allow his wife a separation. Clare has formed a friendship with a literary man of bohemian tastes and revolutionary ideals, Malise, whose iconoclastic doctrines and contempt for the conventional set in which the
Dedmonds move, spur Clare on to open rebellion. She leaves home and having no one else to go to, seeks out Malise for counsel. Malise loves her, but Clare is not at first prepared for more than the friendship already existing between them. George has tracked his wife to Malise’s rooms and naturally supposes the worst; there is a violent scene between the two men and George threatens divorce if his wife does not return home at once. This Clare refuses to do, and Act II closes with her going off to try and earn her own living. It is a hopeless venture for a woman brought up in luxury. Three months later she comes back to Malise, beaten in the wage-earning light, and with changed sentiments towards her friend. She takes up her abode with Malise, while preparations for George’s divorce are going on, but a very few months see their first happiness impaired; Malise is a poor man and the scandal has not improved his prospects in the literary world. Clare realizes that she is wrecking his life and attention for her is feeling the strain of material reverses. In a gesture of supreme self-sacrifice she goes away, penniless, friendless, into a world where she no longer has any place. The last act shows her confronted with one possibility always remaining to a young and beautiful woman; but Clare Dedmond is too fine-grained to follow the oldest profession in the world; death will release her from a prostitute life which has become unbearable and she poisons herself.

In the play A Family Man John Builder shows his authority on his family. His unfortunate temperament, masterfulness, and control on
his family make his elder daughter leave the house. His younger daughter also takes her departure to go to the “movies.” Mrs. Builder also cannot bear her husband’s ways any longer and yearns for liberty. Even his French maid, Camille, refuses to become his mistress because of his furious mood. With unerring certitude, Galsworthy brings Builder’s fate home to us.

John Galsworthy is, undoubtedly, a playwright of social conscience. Preoccupied with class-consciousness and class conflict, he wrote realist and socially critical plays. He used drama as an instrument of social debate, and he strongly believed that the artist’s duty is to examine a problem, not to offer a solution.
References


