

# Rising conflict between the nobility and the masses in 'The Skin Game'

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**Abstract :** The nobility has always looked down upon the masses and treated them as dirt. How the other half lives and loves, has always piqued their curiosity but never encouraged to lend a helping hand. The rift between the two is forever widening and the conflict on the rise. A study of "The Skin Game", should prove this further.

**IndexTerms – Nobility, masses, rift, conflict, widening.**

## I. SUMMARY

In *The Skin Game* the conflict of interest lies between the English nobility and the rising manufactures. As R.H. Coats comments, "The conflict here is between a representative of the land owning gentry, rooted to the soil of old England, and a representative of the newly rich, pushfully – aggressive, brutally energetic manufacturing class."<sup>1</sup>

One again Galsworthy has a strong grip on the subject. The plot itself is popular and it is technically skillful. This was his first commercial success on the stage. Here an equal emphasis has been laid on the social question presented as well as on individual psychology and problem. Chloe, the unfortunate victim of the family feud, is portrayed with as much care and honesty as the social problem itself. In the background of deadly rivalry between the wasted nobility and the rising bourgeoisie, her pathetic and is depicted. The attention of the dramatist is occupied as much by the individual as by the central problem and there is a functional relationship between the problem of the individual and that of the society.

The central conflict in the skin game revolves round two families, the Hillcrists and the Hornblowers. That conflict gradually gains in poignance and concentration in the personal conflict and consequent tragedy of chloe, the women with a past. These two conflicts, interpenetrating each other, are set off against the delightful adolescent relationship between Rolf and Jill. They very contrast makes the conflicts more powerful, especially on the stage.

Mrs. Chloe would not have had to suffer such disgrace if the rivalry between the two families of 'hillcrists and hornblowers' did not exist. Just to be one up, her past is raked relentlessly by Hillcrist until he comes up with all the proof needed to expose her. It is interesting to note here that while chloe is stretched on the rack because of her past, Jill, the daughter of Hillcrist and Rolf, the younger son of Hornblower, carry on their love affair in secrecy and in peace. Misfortune befalls only poor Mrs. Chloe mainly because of the strife between country gentleman Hillcrist and newly rich Hornblower.

Mrs. Chloe's exposure takes place later in the play. The auction sale of the country estate becomes the bone of contention between Hillcrist and Hornblower. Mrs. Hillcrist by this time has gathered some shady and unsavoury things about the past life of Mrs. Chloe. Now is the time for her to take revenge on Hornblower. Mrs. Hillcrist is depicted as a revengeful and unscrupulous woman. She does not bother to think of the consequences before disrupting chloe's happy and peaceful marriage. Dawker, who is a rogue acts as a tool. He harasses and threatens Mr. chloe with serious consequences. He makes use of Mrs. Chloe as a pawn in the game of one-up-manship between Hillcrist and Hornblower.

Mrs. Chloe is genuinely frightened by the threat of exposure of her past life by Dawker. She tries her level best to dissuade him from doing such grievous harm to her marital life. She pleads with him, threatens him, and even tries to bribe him with pearls worth a thousand! But Dawker remains unmoved.

He says about himself, "I'm a plain dog, if you like, but I'm faithful, and I hold fast. Don't try those games on me"<sup>4</sup>. No wonder then that Mrs. Chloe calls him a "beast", a cruel, cowardly beast"<sup>5</sup>. As he had bribed a women (Ann) to spy on her. Mrs. Chloe is now a reformed woman. She is a loving wife to a respected gentlemen and is trying to forget her past misery. But Dawker poses a great threat to her life in this world of aristocrats by exposing her dubious past. She is desperate to save her life with the Hornblowers. In her bewilderment she offers him anything he would take, not to destroy her life. She even offers herself. She is frightened to death by the thought of rejection by her husband Charles who, she is would do so on knowing her past.

Mrs. Chloe's pleadings have no effect on the rogue that Dawker is. He divulges her shady past to Hornblower without any consideration of Mrs. Chloe's future. Hornblower, as expected is shocked to hear about his daughter-in-law's past. Mrs. Hillcrist discloses to Hornblower that before her marriage, she had been dubiously employed. She used to make her living out of divorce cases arranged to enable the divorce to take place. Mrs. Chloe tries hard to deny all the charges against her, but after the testimony of the two "strangers", she finally gives in. Her silence confirms her confession. Hornblower gives chloe a good dressing down and reproaches her severely. She pleads with her father-in-law secret to her husband for the sake of the child she is expecting. She loves her husband Charlie very much and cannot think of living without him. She says so to her father-in-law, "I love charlie : I'm faithful to him. I can't live without him you. II never forgive me, I know, but Charlie....." Hornblower who is quite found of chloe doesn't wish her to suffer and. Therefore, condescends to keep the secret to himself. Mrs. Chloe, now proceeds to plead with Hillcrist not to disclose her secret as it would destroy her marital life. She confesses of doing great wrong to her husband by not telling him about her earlier life and pleads that she is "not such a bad lot..... not really. There were compelling circumstances, her father went "bankrupt, and I was in shop till .....9". Making a clean breast of herself she says.

"I never gave a man away or did anything I was ashamed of at least I mean, I have to make by living in all sorts of ways, and then I met Charlie<sup>10</sup>".

Mrs. Chloe feels she has suffered enough already as it is : "I've paid for being a fool.... this'n't fun, that sort of life, I can tell you<sup>11</sup>". She declares that she is not "ashamed and repentant." What she is afraid of is that Charlie will never forgive her. It is a great "disgrace" for him, and then she has "his child", she never felt so bad and lost in life. She is bewildered she has no idea what shall she do if her husband turns away from her:

"I've got soft, being looked after-he does love me. And if he throws me off. I'll go under that is all <sup>12</sup>". Explaining her agony, she says to Hillcrist, "You've never been right down in the ud. You can't understand what I've been through<sup>13</sup>".

Mrs. Chloe's pleadings all go in vain and Charlie does get to know about her past life. He is enraged and anguished. He becomes mad with anger and believing the worst of his wife, he visits Hillcrist's residence to find her out. He suspects that there is some sort of understanding between Hillcrist and chloe. He loved her, she has been his wife for three years and all along she's been living a lie with him. It is too much for him to take in and he says to Hillcrist, "She-she put you up to it. Liar that she is – a living lie. For three years a living lie.....I've done with her- I won't own a child by such a woman<sup>14</sup>".

Now, here we find Galswothy suggesting that a marriage is based on mutual faith, trust and understating. Both partners ought to be true to each other and there should be no secrets between husband and wife. Chloe breaks a moral code by hiding her earlier life from Charles and thus has to suffer the consequences. However, Charles cannot be left blameless. His faith in his wife of three years and the mother-to- be of his child is very shaky. Without even bothering to look into the reasons and circumstances which forced chloe to lead such a life, and her logic in hiding the truth from him, he immediately believes the worst of her. His love for her does not seem to run too deep. Galswothy tries to make another point here, that in a male-dominated social order, it is always the women who is a victim, a sufferer, and faces social ostracism. Hillcrist is Hornblower's rival, but he has real sympathy for Mrs. Chloe. He tells Charles that she is in great "distress" and is "a most unhappy creature<sup>15</sup>". He urges Charles to brace up and be "gently" with her. A woman in the state of Mrs. Chloe, deserves compassion and consideration. Outright rejection might lead to disastrous consequences. Hillcrist understands the agony Mrs. Chloe is undergoing as a result of the disclosures made by Dawker to Charles.

He fears that Mrs. Chloe, in her desperate state of mind might take drastic steps such as ending her life. Jill is equally anxious about her welfare. Hillcrist is moved by humanitarian consideration for Mrs. Chloe who is "with child." Approehnding danger he says, "Who knows where things end when they once begin? To the gravel pit, Jill, I'll go to the pond. No, we' II go together<sup>16</sup>". The tragic irony is that this apprehension comes true.

The general public too is to blame for chloe's desperate end. It's love for scandal is the culprit for the destruction of many a happy home. People love to lap up scandals such as one regarding Mrs. Chloe. They even spread the facts around, distorted to their own convenience! Dawker, though a scoundrel himself, rightly says, "It's got out that there's a scandal; common talk in the village-not the facts, but quite enough to cook their goose here<sup>18</sup>". The consequences of a scandal, particularly for a woman, are terrible. One cannot imagine the magnitude of needless suffering it causes.

Baffled by adverse circumstances Mrs. Chloe takes the extreme step by drowning herself in a pond. Hillcrist and Charles bring chloe's motionless body in their arms. She was found in the gravel pit. She was just "breathing". Hornblower blurts out to Hillcrist, "You've got me beaten and disgraced here about, ye've destroyed my son's married life, and you've killed my grandchild<sup>19</sup>". However, the happy news is broken by Jill who comes to inform that Mrs. Chloe has recovered: "Dodo' she's spoken. It may not be so bad." Hillcrist realizes the futility of the "skin game" which beings and ends in this heartless manner. His repentance is an affirmation of the fact that vengeance is always fraught with serious and mostly unfortunate consequences: "when we began this fight, we had clean hands- are they clean now? What's gentility worth if it can't stand fire<sup>20</sup>". Realization of this kind is a great redeeming quality. And so, Hillcrist is redeemed of all his follies. However, the fact remains that he damage has been done. Nothing can compensate the sorrow and sufferance Mrs. Chloe has undergone.

## II. CONCLUSION

We find in this play that Mrs. Chloe, like Mrs. Annie Roberts in *Strife* is subjected to needless and unmerited suffering for no fault of hers. Schalit justly comments that “chloe, who in reality has nothing to do with the fight, is cruelly destroyed. Not Hillcrest, nor even his wife, can really rejoice in their victory 21”. In the fight between two families for superiority an innocent woman becomes the victim. Like Dawker to defame Mrs. Chloe. This is a clear case of character assassination. Damages caused by it are irreparable. Galsworthy here advocates greater understanding for the consequences before taking any steps to defame an innocent victim. The message of this play is that of goodwill and understanding..

## REFERENCES

1. R.H. Coats: *John Galsworthy As a Dramatic Artist*, London, Duckworth, 1926, P. 139.
2. Hornblower the bumptious upstart, says to aristocratic hillcrest, “I ‘m new, and ye’re an old family! ..... I make things and sell them, and ye don’t like that. I buy land; and ye don’t like that..... well, I don’t like you, and I’m not goin to put up with your attitude. “The plays of John Galsworthy ‘The skin Game’ London, Duckworth, 1929, p. 525.
3. Mrs. Hillcrest tells Hornblower, “The man who is to be divorced often visits a hotel with a strange woman. I am extremely sorry to say that your daughter-in-law, before her marriage, was in the habit of being employed as such a woman.
4. Ibid, P. 553
5. Ibid, P. 554
6. Chole says to hornblower, “your grand child. For the sake of it, do what these people what : and don’t tell anyone. Don’t tell Charlie.”  
Ibid, P. 562
7. Ibid, P. 563
8. Ibid, P. 568
9. Ibid, P. 568
10. Ibid, P. 568
11. Ibid, P. 568
12. Ibid, P.568
13. Ibid, P.569
14. Ibid, P.570
15. Ibid, P.571
16. Ibid, P.571
17. Ibid, P.572
18. Ibid, P.573
19. Ibid, P. 573
20. Ibid, P. 574
21. Leon Schalit : *John Galsworthy: A Survey*, London, Heinman, 1929, P. 289.

