

Two angry social classes



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In a hot, 1950s jury room overlooking the financial district of a city, tensions arise as 12 jurors must decide the verdict for a boy accused of murdering his father. In Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*, the equilibrium between the social classes in the courtroom and the social class of the accused determines the final verdict given by the jury. Coming from different ethnic and social backgrounds, the men struggle for a consensus on the ruling. Their interactions inside the jury room represent how the different social classes treat each other in everyday life.

Inside the realm of the courtroom, the jurors are “cut off from the world” and from the substance of their everyday lives” (Munyan 1997). The trial forces them to create their own world in which they bring forth their experiences to solve the case. “The experiences, perceptions, and attitudes accumulated over a dozen disparate lifetimes [rush into a] comparatively few shared hours” (Munyan 1997). The jurors derive from different backgrounds and their decisions throughout the play reflect the social classes in which they grew up. Juror 8, who implies that he endured the slum life as a younger man, has sympathy for the accused because he recognizes how negatively the rich treat the poor. “This boy's been kicked around all his life. You know why slum kids get that way? Because we hit 'em on the head once a day, every day” (Rose, 5). Possibly speaking from personal experience, Juror 8 gives an example of what caused the boy to be the way he is and suggests that the other jurors owe him a few words. The boy grew up in an environment surrounded by violence and crime, which influenced his criminal record. A representative of the rich and privileged side, Juror 10 rebuffs his statement. “We don't owe him a thing” (Rose 5). The rich never

experience what the poor suffer through and in turn cannot comprehend the hardships of living a lower class life. Juror 10 then says, “ You know what this trial cost? He’s lucky he got it” (Rose 5). This statement reflects how the upper class looks at the lower class: the rich are superior to the poor. The rich do not believe that the boy is even worth wasting money on for a trial simply because he comes from the slums; the better-off believe him to be guilty no matter what.

The life of this young man is on the line and the jurors determine whether he will live or die. However, for the upper-class men, the lines between work and play blur as they focus more on their frivolous privileges than on the boy’s outcome. The poor see the urgency and importance of the situation while the rich, anxious to get the trial over with, callously declare the boy guilty. Juror 7’s first line, “ this better be fast. I’ve got tickets to The Seven Year Itch tonight,” suggests his lack of interest in or care for the accused because he sees the poor as inferior and unimportant (Rose 3). When Juror 8 asks the others if they still believe the boy lied about his alibi, Juror 7 says, “ We could be here all night,” once again evoking his negative feelings towards the boy (Rose 10). His attitude reflects his dissatisfaction with jury duty interfering with his plans, but he projects his negativity onto the boy on trial. Attempting to heighten Juror 7’s awareness of the important situation, Juror 9 then replies, saying, “ It’s only one night. A man may die” (Rose 10). Juror 9 thinks deeper about the issue at hand and knows what is at stake. He does not simply treat this case as something to get over with, but as a complicated battle with real people that could result in more social dysfunction and more death than just one isolated murder.

The jurors who clearly grew up privileged speak about poor people and slum life in a way that critically illuminates how the rich live and act. They associate all lower class people with crime, disobedience, and violence. The boy's lower class background puts him at a disadvantage not only because the upper class generalizes about him but also because they disregard him as a person. As Juror 8 points out, " Somehow I felt the defense council never really conducted a thorough cross examination. I mean he was appointed by the court to defend the boy. He hardly seemed interested" (Rose 8). The man who was supposed to be fighting for the boy to live and go free seemed indifferent to the case, denoting that he saw it as unimportant. Indeed, the defense attorney did not take the case seriously simply because the defendant was not up to specific social standards.

Juror 10, described as " judgmental with no right," says, " A kid kills his father. Bing! Just like that. Well, it's the element. They let the kids run wild. Maybe it serves ' em right" (Rose 1 & 3). He implies that these crimes happen all the time in slum life because that is, well, just how slums are. However, the jurors of the lower class background speak of the boy without consciously referring to his class status. Juror 9 acts as the voice of reason in this case, as he believes in not generalizing about a person based on socioeconomic background. " Since when is dishonesty a group characteristic? You have no monopoly on the truth" (Rose 5). The choice of the word monopoly is specific to the character Juror 9 addresses. Because he speaks to Juror 10, one who has known the advantages of money all his life, Juror 9 knows that the rich man will recognize the power that comes with monopolizing. Juror 9 then says, " What this man says is very dangerous"

(Rose 5). If the rest of the world takes on the idea that the rich have a lock on what is true and accepted and that people of lower class are unimportant and untrustworthy, the world will be dangerous for anyone who goes against the upper class. After making his compelling argument demonstrating the dishonesty of poor people, Juror 10 attempts to validate a woman's testimony, which indicates that she saw the murder happen. In response, Juror 8 asks him, " How come you believed her? She's one of " them" too, isn't she? (Rose 7). Juror 10 realizes his blunder in contradicting his earlier statement which stereotyped all poor people as dishonest.

Juror 3 is a representative of those who blame the poor for the downfall of society. When he first mentions his son, he says bitterly, " I've got a kid" (Rose 8). He tells the others that he beat his own son into becoming a man. His son left home, and Juror 3 has not seen him since. His attitude suggests that he sees his son in the accused boy and takes his anger out on him. He also takes his anger out on the poor and slum life because he thinks that these forces caused his son to leave and become the way he is. Juror 4 attacks the lower class and their way of life when he says, " The children who come out of a slum background are potential menaces to society" (Rose 8). Juror 10 agrees. " You said it there. I don't want any part of them, believe me" (Rose 8). Based solely on harsh judgment of the lower class, the upper class defines the standards by which the poor people act. Catching them in their act of judgment, Juror 5 speaks haltingly. " I've lived in a slum all my life. I used to play in a backyard that was filled with garbage. Maybe it still smells on me" (Rose 8). The rich men who previously degraded his lifestyle

indignantly deny that their statements meant anything personal. However, they cannot take back their offensive generalizing.

Because the divide between the rich and poor jurors is equal, Juror 8 may have used this point to his advantage when he pushes for a not guilty verdict. He realizes that he could use the sympathy of the poor jurors to build a case for the accused. According to critic Bryan Aubrey, a juror “ feels driven to oppose the majority, sticking to his or her opinion” even if “ there is no evidence to support.” It is possible that because of the societal oppression Juror 8 experiences as a result of living in the lower class, he craves an opportunity to oppose the majority when there is a chance that he could be successful. When the jurors review the testimony of the old man witness, both 8 and 9 suggest the possibility that the witness lied for attention (Rose 15). Noticing the details of the man’s attire and stature, Juror 9 suggests, “ this is a quiet insignificant man who has been nothing all his life, [and] needs to be recognized” (Rose 16). Juror 9 relates to the old man because of the failure that he feels has descended upon his own life. They both seek to make something of themselves, be it lying under oath or keeping a boy out of the electric chair.

The different representations of social classes in the jury room clarify how people’s backgrounds affect their decisions. The lower class boy put on trial grabbed the sympathy of Juror 8, who convinced the other jurors to follow suit. Twelve Angry Men’s insights into the jury process reflect how the upper and lower classes still interact today. This drama gives a clear portrayal of the moral differences between the classes, and of how members of these groups treat others outside of their own class.

Works Cited
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