

# CHAPTER 30 - The Dinner and the Drama

In "The Dinner and the Drama," the chapter discusses a cultural shift in America that is diminishing the quality and appreciation of theatre, comparing it unfavorably with the past. Claude Frollo, in Hugo's narrative, symbolizes a prophetic vision where one societal change eclipses another; here, the elaboration and timing of dinners are seen as encroaching upon the traditional appeal and cultural position of drama. Highlighting New York's paradox of numerous and richly funded theaters yet a declining stage for classic and quality performances, the text laments the absence of significant contemporary contributions to drama from American authors.

The chapter delves into several reasons for this decline, attributing a significant part to changes in social habits, particularly the "star" system, difficulties maintaining stock companies, and a shortage of American acting talent. However, a critical yet overlooked factor is identified as the changing dinner habits—moving from early, simple family meals to late, elaborate social events—thus competing with theater attendance. This shift has not only altered the practicality of attending performances but also transformed the meal into a substantial, luxurious social function that rivals the appeal of the theatre.

The changing landscape of New York's dining scene from the 1870s, including the rise of dining establishments that cater to leisure and luxury, has contributed to this phenomenon. The variety and appeal of such dining experiences offer a compelling alternative to theatre-going. Consequently, this has led to a mismatch between audience expectations and the offerings of the theatre, with preference increasingly given to light entertainment over intellectually or artistically stimulating performances.

Comparison with European dining and theatre-going habits underscores a distinct cultural difference, suggesting that the American shift towards late, luxurious dining is not universally paralleled and that in other cultures, theatre still holds a central place in social life. The chapter concludes on a hopeful note, suggesting that the current low in American drama may eventually give way to a resurgence of interest and quality in the theatre, driven by a desire for intellectually and emotionally fulfilling experiences that go beyond mere amusement.

The chapter critically explores the complex interrelation between societal trends and cultural consumption, arguing that the evolution of dining practices has inadvertently contributed to a devaluation of drama in America. It calls for a reflection on the social priorities that guide entertainment choices and their long-term implications for cultural enrichment.