

Immense Variety of Humour in Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer

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ABSTRACT

Goldsmith was a writer of versatile genius. Goldsmith is one of the greatest humorists in the English language. His greatness as a dramatist is to be evaluated in the context of the state of the English drama at the time. His comic muse is characterized by immense variety. Goldsmith's *She stoops to Conquer* is one of the finest comedies in the language. He wrote the play with the firm intention of amusing and entertaining. *Hardcastle* has a fine sense of humour and a lively wit. It is his sense of humour which enables him to bear so much with a smile on his face. When his wife speaks of Tony's reaching the age of discretion, he retorts that he will never do that.

GOLDSMITH AS A DRAMATIST

Oliver Goldsmith was born at Pallas in Ireland in 1728. He was the fifth child of the reverend Charles Goldsmith and Ann Jones Goldsmith. At the age of eight, he contracted small pox and was left badly scarred by the disease. This long with an already unprepossessing appearance, convinced him of his own ugliness and made him the subject of ridicule throughout his life. He was placed in the school at Longford through the assistance of his relatives. It is said that he was turned out of the school, and decided to go to Cork on his way to America. He had little money with him, and inquired for an inn where to pass the night. He was sent by a mischievous person to a gentleman's house as to an inn. This incident afterwards formed the basis of the plot of *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Goldsmith was one of the most important writers of the eighteenth century dramatists. The precise nature of his achievement as a playwright has yet to be explored with the care which the subject deserves. Goldsmith came to the drama fairly late in his career, being thirty seven. He

had established himself as one of the notable literary men of the period. His best works are *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1776), his pastoral poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) and his play *The Good Natured Man* (1768) and *She stoops to Conquer* (1771).

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The crucial test to judge the greatness of a dramatist is his ability to sketch characters who are living breathing human beings and not wooden types or abstractions. Goldsmith is a master of the art of characterization. He came to the drama quite late in his career when he had acquired deep insight into human nature, and the secret springs of human action, and this knowledge of human nature makes his dramatic personages such credible human beings.

Goldsmith's masterpiece shows his complete mastery of stagecraft and dramatic technique. He learned many things from the failure of *The Good natured Man*, his first play. In *She stoops to Conquer* all crudities and excesses have been pruned away, the action has been speeded up so that we are not conscious of the improbabilities for which the play has been criticized.

From the very beginning there are hints and references which foreshadow the events to come. There is not dull moment anywhere, expectations are aroused and the audience is eager to know what is going to happen next. It is a triumph of dramatic construction; there is not even a single false step from beginning to the end. The exposition of the play is a masterpiece. The title *She stoops to Conquer* refers to the device of its heroine to conquer her object of love, Marlow by stooping to play the role first of a bar-maid and then of a poor relation.

The subtitle *The Mistakes of a Night* refers to the several mistakes Marlow committed during the course of a single night. First he mistakes the residence of a respectable country Squire Hardcastle to be an inn. Second he takes Hardcastle himself to be an innkeeper though an uncommon one and thirdly, he mistakes Miss Hardcastle to be a bar maid. It is all a comedy of

errors packed with hilarious fun and laughter. There is not even a single dull moment from the beginning to end.

The plot of the play is made up of a main plot and a sub plot. The main plot consists of the Marlow- Kate Hardcastle love story. The subplot deals with Hastings – Constance Neville love story. The two stories are fused into a single whole by the intrigues of Tony Lumpkin, the step son of the Mr.Hardcastle. It is he who initiates the action, as well as brings it to a successful conclusion.

HUMOUR: ITS IMMENSE VARIETY

Goldsmith sets out to make us laugh and he does so successfully. He used for his plot a reputed experience of his own as a school boy. When having lost his way, he asked for an inn and was directed by a practical joke to the local squire's house. He behaved there rather as Marlow, the hero of his play, behaves but in the morning when he called for his bill, discovered that the man he had assumed to be an innkeeper was in fact an old college friend of his father. His use of the incident is farcical; but his hero Marlow and his friend Hastings are possible young men; his host innkeeper, Mr. Hardcastle and his wife are another convincing pair of characters.

The play is blend of broad and light comedy. Hardcastle has a fine sense of humour and a lively wit. It is his sense of humour which enables him to bear so much with a smile on his face. When his wife speaks of Tony's reaching the age of discretion, he retorts that he will never do that. When she says that she is afraid of his lungs, Hardcastle wittily observes that he also is afraid of Tony's Lungs that is of his loud shouting.

His sense of humour enables him to see the ludicrous aspect of things and keeps him always in a genial and cheerful frame of mind. When his daughter tells him that Marlow is a shy and modest youth, he laughs in his sleeve, for he knows why she has a suddenly formed this good opinion of Marlow. He is shrewd enough to understand the situation at once, and forgives Marlow for all his previous insolence and is well pleased that both he and his daughter like each other so well.

Kate Hardcastle becomes a source of comedy because there is also very contrast between her words and actions. She had resolved not to break her heart over the indifference of the young

visitor but falls madly in love with him and even angles for his love by assuming the role of a bar maid. She herself does not know her own weakness that she would so easily lose her heart to a youth. The dramatist exhibits this weakness in an amusing manner. She not only loves but chases her lover, so as to make him love her.

Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle are great comic figures. Mr. Hardcastle suffers from the weakness of telling his favourite stories to anybody he can get hold of. He has told his stories to Diggory and his fellows. They have laughed without knowing what they were laughing at. He begins to tell these stories enthusiastically to his visitors and is shocked when they give him a cold shoulder.

Mrs Hardcastle's weakness consists in her blind love for her son Tony. She would try to get the best things for him. She pretends to be much younger than what she is. She loves the latest fashions and though she has never been to London, she reads the Scandalous Magazine and the letters from Miss. Ricketts of London to satisfy her craze for finery and fashion. This weakness has been exposed and ridiculed by the dramatist.

It is a laughing comedy, the purpose of the dramatist being neither moral edification nor social satire, but the entertainment of the readers and audiences. Through the comedy is largely situational and as in a farce there is much broad humour and horse laughter arising from situation and incident as in the garden scene with Mrs. Hardcastle mistaking her own husband to be a highway man and kneeling to him or in the casket scene with Tony bearing witness to what his mother says, or in the scene in which Hardcastle trains his servants in table manners. The play abounds in the humour of character, the humour of the highest kind.

The different characters have their own follies and weakness and these have been fully exploited, exposed and ridiculed by the dramatist. Mr. Hardcastle loves everything that is old particularly his old stories which is never tired of narrating in season and out of season.

Tony Lumpkin is an immortal figure of fun the very life and soul of the play. Others might think him to be a fool and a booby, but this booby is no fool at all. He has his revenge on his step father and misdirects Marlow and Hastings to his own house as to an inn. He has a fertile brain and can form a plan of action on the spur of the moment. This illiterate boy, who cannot

even read his own letters that we have a hearty laugh at his expense, thinks of the plan of driving the ladies round and round the house.

Humour of character arises when there is a contrast or incongruity in the words and actions of a character. When a character says one thing and does another. Marlow has come to court and marry Kate Hardcastle but he is so shy and modest that he cannot look her and has only a dull sentimental interview with her in whom the conversation is kept going with great difficulty. What is even more absurd is his desire that Hastings should be there throughout to keep up his courage. He collapses as soon as his friend is gone.

Further, this shy youngman is very bold and forward in the company of women of another sort and is called agreeable rattle by the ladies at the ladies club. This aspect of his character is revealed when he proceeds to make love to the barmaid and tries to kiss her by the use of force. This contrast in his nature is highly comic and the dramatist has made good use of it.

The humour view of life separates the play from the two opposing schools of its own day. It is certainly unsentimental without any parade or refined sensibilities even in its heroines. It is pure comedy throughout eschewing tears and reforms. It is also free from the sarcastic or satirical attitudes of Congreve. It offers no view of high society or stylish wit. It can be called high comedy either in the sense that it is concerned with the refinement of humour and manners as opposed to low and obvious excitement of laughter or in the sense that its plot is determined by its characters.

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