UNIT 7:OLIVER GOLDSMITH: *SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- highlight the major themes in the play *She Stoops to Conquer*
- identify the major characters of the play and describe them
- discuss the language and style of the playwright
- critically analyse the reception that is related to the play
- appreciate the play for its sheer comic involvement

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit should be studied in connection with the previous unit which deals with the life and works of Oliver Goldsmith and a brief summary of the play *She Stoops to Conquer.* In this unit, however, you will get an opportunity to discuss, in some detail, the various important aspects like themes, characterisation, language and critical reception of the novel. One of the important thematic aspects of the play is the contradiction between the

country and the city. Although written in the later part of the 18th century, the language used in the play is quite closer to the Restoration comedy of manners. You perhaps know that The Comedy of Manners" contained certain stereotypes which reflected on the vices or the virtues of the different characters. However, while going through this play, you will note that the Comedy of Manners was soon replaced by the sentimental comedy in which the characters are flawed without being evil. This is what comes out so visibly through the play *She Stoops to Conquer*.

7.3 READING THE PLAY *SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER*

One of the best plays of Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer* is a pleasure to read. In the following sub-sections, emphasis has been given to the important themes, characters and language of the play.

7.3.1 Major Themes

Following are the major themes of the play *She Stoops to Conquer.*

Contradiction in Human Nature: One of the major themes of the play is that of contradiction in human nature.Most characters in the play want others to be simple to understand. This in many ways mirrors the expectations of an audience that Goldsmith wishes to mock. Where his characters are initially presented as comic types, he spends time throughout the play complicating them all by showing their contradictions. Most clear are the contradictions within Marlow, who is both refined and base. The final happy ending comes when the two friends – Hardcastle and Sir Charles – decide to accept the contradictions in their children. In a sense, this theme helps to understand Goldsmith's purpose in the play, reminding us that all people are worthy of being mocked because of their silly, base natures, and no one is above reproach. Another aspect that is present in the play is that of conflict. Throughout the play conflict between the refined attitudes of town and the simple behaviours of the country is reflected. The importance of this theme is underscored by the

fact that it is the crux of the opening disagreement between Hardcastle and his wife. Where country characters like Hardcastle see town manners as pretentious, town characters like Marlow see country manners as foolish. However, the best course of action is proposed through Kate, who is praised by Marlow as having a "refined simplicity." Having lived in town, she is able to appreciate the values of both sides of life and can find happiness in appreciating the contradictions that exist between them. Much of this play's comedy comes from the tricks and deceit played by various characters. The most compelling deceits come from Tony, including his lie about Hardcastle's home and his scheme of driving his mother and Constance around in circles. However, deceit also touches to the center of the play's more major themes. In a sense, the only reason anyone learns anything about their deep assumptions about class and behaviour is because they are tricked into seeing characters in different ways. This truth is most clear with Marlow and his shifting perspective on Kate, but it also is true for the Hardcastles and Sir Charles, who are able to see the contradictions in others because of what trickery causes.

Differences between the Country and the City: The play also shows the clear differences between the country and the city. The urban part is associated with fashion and mannerisms, whilst the countryside reflects the simplicity. Duplicity is something which is associated with the urban life as characters such as Marlow and Hastings have to involve in deceitful acts for love and marriage. Similarly the characters of the country too have to indulge in tricks and duplicity. This is initially highlighted when Tony plays a prank on Marlow and Hastings. There is contrast between the reality and the appearance. This becomes true not only of the situations these characters have to face, but also because it becomes a trait of their characters. The young characters in the play whether it is Marlow, Kate, Constance, Hastings or Tony–everyone is forced to hide their true intentions. Out of all these characters, however, Marlow faces

the ordeal of being in a state of confusion. He wishes to court Kate but fails to do so because of his coyness in front of ladies of position. However he is at ease with her as a barmaid. Here Goldsmith also exposes the workings of class division in the eighteenth century England.

Jonathon Munby, the director of the play in 2007 under "The Birmingham Repertory Theatre", said the following regarding what the play is all about:

"The thing that feels most potent to me and that I know that Goldsmith was interested in is the tension between town and country and class difference. Also the snobbery that is born out of that tension – the difference between country living and town living and also the aspiration of wanting to transcend a barrier and become something other. For example a country dweller who wants to be a townie, or the tension of a town dweller arriving in the country and feeling that they are like a fish out of water. Or, someone wishing to transcend class and discovering the tension as a result of that desire is brought brilliantly to light by the play and feels very resonant now. We still live in a London-centric country where the provinces feel second best to the capital and I think that there is a snobbery that's born out of that. I know that this play goes to the heart of that current feeling. The other thing, which comes absolutely from Goldsmith – he was an individual who found it difficult to operate in public – is shyness and fear. The expectation that we put on young people to find matches, and the expectation that we put on a young man specifically in this instance to woo and court and find a perfect match (to woo his Kate) and what happens as a result of those expectations. There's a high stake situation and that's a fascinating thing in the play and something that we all have an emotional connection with."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did Oliver Goldsmith portray the contradiction in human nature through this play?

Q 2: Describe the theme of country versus city in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer.*

7.3.2 Major Characters

"The Comedy of Manners" contained certain stereotypes where the vices or the virtues of the characters, and there was also the use of wit and gaiety that delighted the audience. The Comedy of Manners was however soon replaced by the sentimental comedy, but was later revived by playwrights such as Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Sheridan. In the plays of Goldsmith, we see that the characters are flawed without being evil. This is true in the case of all the characters, even in Tony Lumpkin of *She Stoops to Conquer*. Then, we also see that emphasis is laid on the heroine's personality rather than that of the hero. The following is a brief look at the major characters of the play.

Kate Hardcastle:

In the play,Kate Hardcastle is the protagonist and she is a young, vivacious and witty young woman. On realising Marlow's inhibitions, she decides to "stoop" low and assumes the role of a barmaid so as to captivate him. Apart from her physical charms, Kate is represented as an obedient daughter who is equally concerned about her family. Unlike other female protagonists of the sentimental plays, Kate is not naive or shallow. Her love for French fashions and willingness to listen to any suitor who is young, brave, generous and handsome, she represents a typical eighteenth century maiden. However, she is a sensible young woman who realises that she would lose Marlow if she remains passive. Like the female

characters of George Bernard Shaw, Kate Hardcastle chases and courts the man she loves, instead of being chased and courted. Kate then marks herself as the heroine through her moderation. As the character who understands both the simplicity of the country and the sophistication of the town, she understands that life is about contradiction and excitement, and that happiness comes from embracing a bit of both sides. None of the characters exhibits such a strong understanding of life that Goldsmith seems to value. Kate's cousin Constance too is charming but she lacks the vivacity of Kate Hardcastle. She is however, not blind to what is going on around her. It is for this very reason that she seems hesitant to elope with Hastings and lose the inherited jewels in the process. You can identify Goldsmith's heroines in the play to that of Austen's female characters in her novels.

Marlow:

Unlike the female protagonist of the play, the male protagonist lacks the courage and wit of Kate. Marlow is a handsome and cultured young man, but is a person of dual nature. He behaves like a prude in front of the ladies of his own social class, but becomes at ease no sooner does he encounter common women. It is due to his inhibitions that make him an easy victim of Tony's pranks. He makes an unlikely hero due to his passive nature. An interesting aspect of the play is how the expected gender roles are switched. Marlow's friend George Hastings is depicted as a more upright and honest person. He is well aware of his friend's weaknesses, and so he rebukes Marlow for trying to rob a maiden's virtue (that is Kate in disguise). Hastings is also very much in love with Constance without any motives of making money. He is ready to accept the way she is, and he criticises Mrs. Hardcastle's plans to wed Constance to her son for the jewelry. George Hastings acts as a foil to Marlow; while the former courts his beloved and declares his intentions to marry her, the latter remains hesitant and refuses to come out of his sense of reserve.

Tony Lumpkin:

Tony Lumpkin is another interesting character in the play. He is Mrs. Hardcastle's son from her first husband and has a mirthful spirit. Tony's vices include his tendency to indulge himself any gravity. For this reason, he is often in conflict with his step-father Mr. Hardcastle. His character is often compared to Shakespeare's Falstaff for his wit and pranks. Although there is a trait of malicious mischief in his personality, yet he is not evil. The character of Tony is rounded and shows development as he moves from being an obnoxious person to a more likeable one.

Mr. Hardcastle:

Mr. Hardcastle represents the typical English man of social standing who loves the old ways of England. He loves the simple pleasures of living in the country side unlike his wife who yearns for the fashionable London society. Although a traditionalist, he is a realist and sensible person. This is seen in the way he manages everything. Mr. Hardcastle humours his wife, and is an affectionate father. He intends his daughter to marry for happiness, not for wealth or social status. Mr. Hardcastle is equally concerned about the welfare of his step-son, and that is the reason he points out Tony's faults to his mother. His attempt to rectify Tony does not prevail due to the latter's arrogance.

Mrs Hardcastle:

Mrs Hardcastle is a vain and greedy widow, who re-married after the death of her first husband. Although she is not an evil character, she is essentially selfish and misguided. Unlike Mr Hardcastle who is content with their country life and community, his wife seeks for the pleasures of living in the fashionable London and yearns for its social life. She constantly complains her husband for this reason. Further it is her blind love for Tony Lumpkin that spoils him and makes it impossible to see his shortcomings. Both the parents clearly manage the lives of their children in different ways. We see from our reading of the play that Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle's relationship with their

children was different. Mr. Hardcastle is an ideal father who gives freedom to his daughter to make her own decisions but at the same time also sets the limits. Consequently Kate is much devoted to her father and inherits his sensible nature. Mrs Hardcastle, on the other hand, by giving too much importance to wealth, had in a way, spoilt her son. Consequently Tony lacks respect for his mother. Also, while Mr Hardcastle wants his daughter to marry for compatibility and affection, Mrs Hardcastle forces Tony to marry Constance because of her inheritance and social standing. Her greed and incapacity of perceiving things clearly, prevent her from seeing that her son does not love Constance.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is significant about the representation of characters in the plays of Oliver Goldsmith?

Q 4: Name the protagonist of the play *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith.

Q 5: How does the protagonist of this play differ from those of the sentimental comedies?

Q 6: "An interesting aspect of the play is how the expected gender roles are switched". Discuss.

Q 7: Who is Mrs Hardcastle?

7.3.3 Language

Jonathon Munby, who directed this play in 2007 as part of the "The Birmingham Repertory Theatre" has the following to state regarding the language of the play:

"The play was written in 1771 with the first performance in 1773 and it's important to make sure that we deliver a production of this play that honours where the play has come from, that acknowledges what the play is, and that reaches out to a contemporary audience. The language is a couple of hundred years old; it's closer to that of the Restoration period than modern English. It is a more heightened prose than contemporary writing, so there is the challenge of getting our mouths and our minds round the text to release it for a modern audience. We also need to make sure that we understand the period and where the play has come from well enough to do it justice – the manners, the etiquette and the protocol of the time. We're doing the production in period, so it's about understanding the period well enough in order to release the play."

7.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The play *She Stoops to Conquer* is considered to be one of the finest comedies in the English language as its appeal remains constant. Oliver Goldsmith's first play The Good Natur'd Man was a failure on stage, and so theatre owners of his times refused to accept the second play. Garrick, a friend of Goldsmith didn't accept it to be performed at Drury Lane Theatre. Similarly another theatre manager and actor called Colman hesitated over it. But it was Samuel Johnson who finally succeeded in persuading him to stage the play. The play came to be well-received by the audience. According to A.N.Jeffares, the whole play is a balance between farce and comic wit.

When the play opened on March 15, 1773, it was received initially with mixed reception. Horace Walpole was deeply critical of the play as he believed it was re-introducing low humour. The critic William Woodhall, on the other hand, who although criticised the play, admitted that Goldsmith "certainly has a great share of the comic force; and when he has thrust his people into a situation, he makes them talk funnily." The playwright's strength was in the way he used dialogues and humour that is easily understood by one and all. This is primarily one of the factors that made the play success

among the audience. Horace Walpole also admitted in his review in *Rousseau* that the play's situations are well-imagined and made one laugh. This in itself served the purpose of Goldsmith's motive of writing laughing comedies. Also Samuel Johnson, to whom Goldsmith dedicated the published version of the play, declared that, "I know of no comedy for many years that has so much exhilarated an audience, that has answered so much the great end of comedy, making the audience merry."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Comment on the language of the play.

Q 9: Who has influenced Goldsmith to stage the play, *She Stoops to Conquer?*

Q 10: Who considered the whole play to be a balance between farce and comic wit?

Q 11: Write a note on the critical reception of the play.



7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you learned about the changes that took place in the genre of comedy during the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. Goldsmith's criticism of the sentimental comedy form is seen in *She Stoops to Conquer*, where he makes use of the stereotypes to expose the reality of human nature. Through the character of Kate Hardcastle, we get to see a new type of heroine who is in control of her life. She is not meek and naïve, rather bold and witty in her approach towards her suitor but at the same time she is sensible enough to understand that the reputation of her father was also at stake. Thus, Miss Hardcastle succeeds in conquering the heart of the man of her choice.



7.6 FURTHER READING

1) Birch, D. (ed). (2009). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford University Press.

2) Goldsmith, O. (1991). *She Stoops to Conquer*. Courier Dover Publications.

3) Gwynn, S. L. (1977). *Oliver Goldsmith*. Norwood Editions.

4) Jeffares, A.N. *York Notes: A Critical Commentary on She Stoops to Conquer.*

5) Thorndike, A. H. (1965). *English Comedy*. Cooper Square Publishers.

7.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Ans to Q No 1: Where his characters are initially presented as comic types, he spends time throughout the play complicating them all by showing their contradictions. Most clear are the contradictions within Marlow, who is both refined and base.

Ans to Q No 2: The urban part is associated with fashion and mannerisms, whilst the countryside reflects the simplicity. Duplicity is something which is associated with the urban life as characters such as Marlow and Hastings have to involve in deceitful acts for love and marriage. Similarly the characters of the country too have to indulge in tricks and duplicity.

Ans to Q No 3: In the plays of Goldsmith, we see that the characters are flawed without being evil. This is true in the case of all the characters, even in Tony Lumpkin of *She Stoops to Conquer*. Then, we also see that emphasis is laid on the heroine's personality rather than that of the hero.

Ans to Q No 4: Kate Hardcastle is the protagonist of the play.

Ans to Q No 5: Unlike other female protagonists of the sentimental plays, Kate is not naive or shallow. Her love for French fashions and willingness to listen to any suitor who is young, brave, generous and handsome, she represents a typical eighteenth century maiden. However, she is a sensible young woman who realises that she would lose Marlow if she remains passive. Like the female characters of George Bernard Shaw, Kate Hardcastle chases and courts the man she loves, instead of being chased and courted.

Ans to Q No 6: Unlike the female protagonist of the play, the male protagonist lacks the courage and wit of Kate. Marlow is a handsome and cultured young man, but is a person of dual nature. He behaves like a prude in front of the ladies of his own social class, but becomes at ease no sooner does he encounter common women.

Ans to Q No 7: Mrs.Hardcastle is a vain and greedy widow, who re-married after the death of her first husband. Although she is not an evil character, she is essentially selfish and misguided. Unlike Mr.Hardcastle who is content with their country life and community, his wife seeks for the pleasures of living in the fashionable London and yearns for its social life. She constantly complains her husband for this reason.

Ans to Q No 8: The language is a couple of hundred years old; it is closer to that of the Restoration period than modern English. It is a more heightened prose than contemporary writing.

Ans to Q No 9: It was Samuel Johnson who finally succeeded in persuading Goldsmith to stage the play.

Ans to Q No 10: A.N.Jeffares

Ans to Q No 11: When the play opened on March 15, 1773, it was received initially with mixed reception. Horace Walpole was deeply critical of the play as he believed it was re-introducing low humour. The critic William Woodhall, on the other hand, who although criticised the

play, admitted that Goldsmith "certainly has a great share of the comic force; and when he has thrust his people into a situation, he makes them talk funnily." Horace Walpole also admitted in his review in *Rousseau* that the play's situations are well-imagined and made one laugh. Also Samuel Johnson, to whom Goldsmith dedicated the published version of the play, declared that, "I know of no comedy for many years that has so much exhilarated an audience, that has answered so much the great end of comedy, making the audience merry."



7.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Justify the title of the play *She Stoops to Conquer.*

Q2. In what ways are the characters in the play comic archetypes? How does Goldsmith handle the characterisation?

Q3. How is dramatic irony used by the play wright to facilitate the themes of the play?

Q4. Give a character sketch of the following:

(a) Kate Hardcastle

(b) Tony Lumkin

(c) Marlow

Q5. *She Stoops to Conquer* asserts the class differences that was present during the age of Goldsmith. Elaborate.