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WIT AND HUMOR IN GOLDSMITH'S SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

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Abstract

Oliver Goldsmith has been considered a prolific writer of 18th century who produced the works of different genres. He was a playwright, a novelist and an essayist. His plays are written against sentimentalism of Steele and Lawrence Sterne and hence he seems propagating the theory of anti-sentimentalism. His renowned play she stoops to conquer or The Mistakes of a Night deals well with human relationships, goodness of humanity and humor in life. Characters inside the play belong to the restoration age of William Congreve, Vanbrugh, Etherege, Wycherley. In the restoration age of Charles II, wit was employed mostly in the dramas to the pleasure of king. The present play also fulfills the demands of comedy of manners whereby characters are witty and jolly and amuses the audience/readers with their witty dialogues. Though the comedy deals with various issues as disguises, identities, directions, corrections, politeness, modesty, impudence but all results into humor and hence declares the play to be the best comic play ever.

Keywords: restoration, wit, humor, comic, amusing, modesty.

Oliver Goldsmith's contribution to English Literature is praiseworthy. Coming from the rural Irish background, Goldsmith showed a great interest for social issues and produced a popular novel 'The Vicar of Wakefield', a pastoral poem 'The Deserted Village', a play 'Good natured man' and this five-act play 'She Stoops to Conquer'. When Charles II was restored on the throne in 1660 after eleven years' reign of commonwealth, the theatres were reopened and playwrights came out with witty dramas depicting the courtly life, gentlemen of upper class, aristocratic ladies, scenes of coffee-houses, clubs, and pubs and hence language was corrupt. Following the conventions of comedy of manners, this play depicted the immorality and hypocrisy of Londoners. Later these works were highly criticized for the immorality, vulgarity of language and loose structure of plots by writers such as Jeremy Collier. He criticized these works in his book entitled 'A Short View of the Immorality and

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profaneness of the English Stage Together with the Sense of Antiquity upon This Argument'. Later Richard Steele and Lawrence Sterne gave birth to sentimental comedy in which the morality and goodness of human nature were explored. Oliver goldsmith in his age favored the late restoration comedy of manners and raised his voice against sentimental dramas. He particularly criticized the scenes of weeping in sentimental comedy and was a lover of humor and laughter. Although, he criticized such norms of sentimental comedy and hence called anti-sentimentalist but in his plays, his dealings with the good nature of mankind and the portraits of the family and love relationships is vivid. He loves to make use of dramatic devices such as irony, aside, soliloquies in his works and with these literary weapons, his only purpose is to create humor. Quintana believes that Goldsmith,

“ Proved to be a born dramatist, finding late in his career the medium belles suited than any other to his gift for comic and satiric writing”.(Quintana: 1967)

The short play ‘ She Stoops to Conquer’ is a five-act drama works upon contexts of love and marriage and playwright in his depiction of different relationships of parents, couples, cousins, amuses the readers with their witty dialogues. Goldsmith not only followed the seventeenth century writers of restoration

age but their predecessors too and hence created this masterpiece,

“ Following the tradition of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and the English restoration playwrights of the late seventeenth century, Goldsmith (...) delighted in intricate plots with enough misunderstandings, disguises, mistaken identities, pranks, tests of characters and supreme revelations”.(Danziger:1978)

Wit and Humour

The words ‘Wit’ and ‘Humor’ are the forms of comic and are employed in comic works of literature. These are designed to create laughter and to amuse the readers or audience. The ‘Wit’ signified the brilliant term or intelligent use of words. Later in 16th and 17th century, in Restoration age, it had been used to show literary invention, to develop surprising figures of speech as in the works of Congreve, Etherege and later in Metaphysical poets’ woks. Basically, wit can be called mere a part of humor which refers only to the spoken or written word while humor has a broader range which is not just limited to spoken words rather to some appearance, utterance and actions as well. The term humor is applied to any element which is purely comic and hence sympathetic laughter is also its form while wit produces comic surprise with dialogues of characters.

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“ Wit, that is, now denotes a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise, its typical form is that of the epigram. The surprise is usually the result of the connection or distinction between words or concepts which frustrates the listener’s expectation, only to satisfy in an unexpected way”. (M.H. Abrams:1999)

The main action of ‘ She Stoops to Conquer’ is developed by one major mistake ; when Marlow and his friend Hastings were misguided by Mrs. Hardcastle’s mischievous son Tony Lumpkin who told them to spend their night in an inn, which was actually the house of Mr. Hardcastle, their real destination. Mr. Marlow came for the hand of Hardcastle’s daughter Kate Hardcastle. This mistake has created triangles and humorous incidents. The actions of servants of the house, Marlow’s shy nature, Tony Lumpkin’s cleverness, Neville and Hastings’s affair, Kate’s modesty, Mrs. Hardcastle’s hypocrisy all produce laughter. There are many scenes in the play which amuse the audience, sometimes with the witty dialogues of characters and sometimes with their behavior, appearance and actions. Mr. Marlow had hypo-critical attitude towards women. He appeared as a shy and timid guy in the company of high class women. On the other side, he plays the role of a hero if he is surrounded by lower class maidens. Kate took the benefit

of his this weakness. She was impressed by his modesty and politeness when she was in fancy dress and Marlow took her a lady of upper class. Marlow’s romantic talks have influenced her when she was in ordinary wearing and Marlow was considering her an ordinary bar-maid. Her dialogue with her father about Mr. Marlow’s behavior amuses us. Since Marlow was considering their house an inn, he considered Mr. Hardcastle, the owner of the inn and hence ill-treated him. In act 3, we see, Miss Hardcastle : Sure Sir, you rally! I never saw anyone so modest.

Hardcastle: And can you be serious! I never saw such a bouncing swaggering puppy since I was born. Bullydawson was but a fool to him.

Miss Hardcastle: Surprising! He met me with a respectful bow, a stammering voice, and a look fixed on the ground Hardcastle: He met me with a loud voice, a loudly air, and a familiarity that made my blood freeze again.(Goldsmith:2012)

Kate is obvious a powerful witty figure who after knowing his real identity, continues her humorous conversation with Marlow and she is the one who makes everybody clear the mistake. Finally, she decided to marry him. She is a witty figure considering the fact that,

“ Wit in practice, manifests itself as the ability to dissimulate one’s true desires,

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while simultaneously intuiting the hidden desires of others".(Sussman: 2012)

Mrs. Hardcastle is being ridiculed by playwright for her love for fashionable life. She has been depicted to suggest her husband to change their life style. She is a lady who loves vanity and affectation hence has the similarity with the restoration age type ladies. Her conversation with Mr. Hardcastle is comic whereby she tries to conceal her real age and pretends to be younger than she is. In the beginning, their conversation is comic

Mrs. Hardcastle: Lord, Mr. Hardcastle, you're forever at your Dorothys and your old wives. You may be a Dorby, but I'll be no Joan, I promise you. I'm not so old as you'd make me, by more than one good year. Add twenty to twenty, and make money of that.

Mr. Hardcastle: Let me see! Twenty added to twenty makes just fifty and seven Mrs. Hardcastle: it's false, Mr. Hardcastle; I was but twenty when Tony was born, the son of Mr. Lumpkin, my first husband and he's not come to years of discretion yet. (Goldsmith:2012)

Her dialogue creates sympathetic laughter. Here, she is actually concealing the age of Tony since she is worried mother and tensed for his future. She never disclosed his real age so that she would take his life's decisions. Though, it worked in a wrong way and tony instead became a man of

tricks and mischiefs but her intentions were never wicked.

The prominent role has been played by Tony Lumpkin, the wittiest character and was never mocked by Playwright, rather he appears as a heroic figure, quick-witted who wanted to liberate himself from parental pressure and hence developed the plot. He never wished to marry Neville, Mrs.Hardcastle's niece, with whom his mother wanted him to marry. When he learnt about Neville's affair with Hastings, he quickly turned the table at his own side. He misguided his mother who thought she was with Neville on the right path to aunt Pedigree. Tony frightened her and made her believe that they are in a frightful place, so far from home. It was purely a comic scene. Tony took them in a round, while they supposed themselves going forward, And so he had at last brought them home again. Mrs. Hardcastle's plan to separate Neville and Hastings was destroyed by Tony in no time.

Mrs.Hardcastle: Oh,Tony, I am killed. Shook.Battered to death. I shall never survive it. That last jolt that laid us against the quickest hedge done my business.

Tony: Alack, mamma, it was all your own fault. You would be for running away by night, without knowing one inch of the way.

Mrs. Hardcastle: I wish we were at home again. I never met so many accidents in so short a journey. Drenched in the mud,

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overturned in a ditch, stuck fast in a slough jolted to a jelly, and at last to lose our way. Whereabouts do you think we are, Tony?.”(Goldsmith:2012)

Tony’s plan to teach her a lesson had a comic effect on readers.

Conclusion

On the basis of analysis of Goldsmith’s play, it can be thought that Playwright mainly deals with the themes of love, marriage and family relationships in ‘She stoops to Conquer’. One major mistake and one misleading by Tony Lumpkin made the play masterpiece and hence proved it the best comedy. As in the classic comedies, the ending is happy one as the lovers get together. The play is absolutely a masterpiece, showing the blend of hypocrisy, vanity, love-affairs of restoration age and humanity, parental love of sentimental dramas.

“ She Stoops to Conquer is founded on a plot exceedingly probable and fertile; each act contains a great deal of natural business and incident; the characters are , for the most part, entirely original; they are well drawn, highly finished and admirably supported from the 1st to the last scene of the play” (Goldsmith: 1966)

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