

# She Stoops to Conquer

or, **The Mistakes of a Night**

by Oliver Goldsmith (1730?-1774)

## Type of Play

• *She Stoops to Conquer* is a stage play in the form of a comedy of manners, which ridicules the manners (way of life, social customs, etc.) of a certain segment of society, in this case the upper class. The play is also sometimes termed a *drawing-room comedy*. The play uses farce (including many mix-ups) and satire to poke fun at the class-consciousness of eighteenth-century Englishmen and to satirize what Goldsmith called the "weeping sentimental comedy so much in fashion at present."

## Setting

• Most of the action takes place in the Hardcastle mansion in the English countryside, about sixty miles from London. The mansion is an old but comfortable dwelling that resembles an inn. A brief episode takes place at a nearby tavern, The Three Pigeons Alehouse. The time is the eighteenth century.

## Characters

MEN.

SIR CHARLES MARLOW

YOUNG MARLOW (His Son)

HARDCASTLE

HASTINGS

TONY LUMPKIN

DIGGORY

WOMEN.

MRS. HARDCASTLE

MISS HARDCASTLE

MISS NEVILLE

MAID

LANDLORD, SERVANTS, FELLOWS, Etc. Etc

## Plot Summary

### Act One

In a downstairs room of their old mansion, Dorothy Hardcastle tells her husband that they need a little diversion—namely, a trip to London, a city she has never visited. Their neighbors, the Hoggs sisters and Mrs. Grigsby, spend a month in London every winter. It is the place to see and be seen. But old Hardcastle, content with his humdrum rural existence, says people who visit the great city only bring back its silly fashions and vanities. Once upon a time, he says, London's affectations and fopperies took a long time to reach the country; now they come swiftly and regularly by the coach-load.

Mrs. Hardcastle, eager for fresh faces and conversations, says their only visitors are Mrs. Oddfish, the wife of the local minister, and Mr. Cripplegate, the lame dancing teacher. What's more, their only entertainment is Mr. Hardcastle's old stories about sieges and battles. But Hardcastle says he likes everything old—friends, times, manners, books, wine, and, of course, his wife.

Living in their home with them is their daughter, Kate, a pretty miss of marriageable age, and Tony, Mrs. Hardcastle's son by her first husband, Mr. Lumpkin. As a boy, Tony bedeviled his stepfather, Mr. Hardcastle, with every variety of mischief, burning a servant's shoes, scaring the maids, and vexing the kittens. And, Hardcastle says, "It was but yesterday he fastened my wig to the back of my chair, and when I went to make a bow, I popt my bald head in Mrs. Frizzle's face."

Now as a young man, Tony has become a fat slob who spends most of his time at the local alehouse. Soon he will come of age, making him eligible for an inheritance of 1500 pounds a year with which to feed his fancies. Mrs. Hardcastle wants to match Tony with her niece and ward, Constance Neville, who has inherited a casket of jewels from her uncle. As Miss Neville's guardian, Mrs. Hardcastle holds the jewels under lock and key against the day when Constance can take legal possession of them.

While Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle discuss the London trip that is not to take place, Tony passes between them and sets off for the alehouse, The Three Pigeons. Mrs. Hardcastle chases out the door after him, saying he should find something better to do than associate with riffraff.

Alone, Mr. Hardcastle laments the follies of the age. Even his darling Kate is becoming infected, for now she has become fond of "French frippery." When she enters the room, he tells her he has arranged for her to meet an eligible young man, Mr. Charles Marlow, a scholar with many good qualities who "is designed for employment in the service of the country." Marlow is to arrive for a visit that very evening with a friend, Mr. George Hastings. Young Marlow is the son of Hardcastle's friend, Sir Charles Marlow. Kate welcomes the opportunity to meet the young man, although she is wary about her father's description of him as extremely shy around young ladies.

By and by, Constance Neville comes in for a visit. When Kate tells her about young Mr. Marlow, Constance tells her that her own admirer, Mr. Hastings, a friend of the Marlow family. Miss Neville welcomes the attentions of Hastings but laments Mrs. Hardcastle's attempts to pair her with her "pretty monster," Tony, in an effort to keep Miss Neville's jewels in the family. Tony and Constance despise each other.

Meanwhile, at the alehouse, Tony is having a ripping good time singing and drinking when Hastings and young Marlow come in asking for directions to the Hardcastle home. Having just arrived in the area from London after a wearisome trip, they have lost their way. Tony, who resents Mr. Hardcastle's treatment of him lately, sees a way to get even: He tells Marlow and Hastings that Hardcastle is an ugly, cantankerous fellow and that his daughter is a "tall, trapesing, trolloping, talkative maypole." But, he says, Hardcastle's son (meaning himself) is a "pretty, well-bred youth that everybody is fond of." Marlow says he has been told otherwise, namely, that the daughter is "well-bred and beautiful; the son, an awkward booby, reared up and spoiled at his mother's apron-string."

Taken aback, Tony can only hem and haw. Then, deciding to work a mischief, he tells them the Hardcastle home is too far to reach by nightfall but that there is a nice inn just up the road. The "inn" is, of course, the Hardcastle home. When Marlow and Hastings arrive there, they note that the inn is old but commendable in its own way. Hastings comments that Marlow has traveled widely, staying at many inns, but wonders why such a man of the world is so shy around young women. Marlow reminds him that he is shy only around young ladies of culture and bearing. Around women of the lower classes, he is a nonstop talker, a wag completely at ease. Hastings replies: "But in the company of women of reputation I never saw such an idiot, such a trembler; you look for all the world as if you wanted an opportunity of stealing out of the room."

## **Act Two**

When Mr. Hardcastle enters, he welcomes them as the expected guests—the Marlow fellow who is to meet his daughter and Marlow's friend Hastings. However, the young men—believing that they are at the inn described by Tony—think Mr. Hardcastle is the innkeeper, and treat him like one, giving him orders to prepare their supper and asking to see the accommodations. Hardcastle is much offended by their behavior, thinking them the rudest of visitors, for he remains unaware that they think they are at an inn. He keeps his feelings to himself.

When Hardcastle goes upstairs with Marlow to show him his room, Hastings runs into Constance Neville and, through his conversation with her, realizes that he is at the Hardcastle home, not an inn. Hastings decides to keep the information a secret from Marlow, fearing that Marlow would react to the mix-up by immediately leaving. Thus, he allows Marlow to believe that Constance and Kate are also guests at the "inn."

When Marlow finally meets Kate, his shyness all but tongue-ties him. Almost every time he starts a sentence, Kate has to finish it. But she compliments him on being so clever as to bring up interesting topics of conversation. All the while that they talk, Marlow lacks the courage even to look at her face. He does not even know what she looks like.

In another room, Tony, who has returned from the pub, and Constance are insulting each other, as usual, to the dismay of Mrs. Hardcastle. After Hastings observes their spitfire give-and-take, he tells Tony he will take the young lady off his hands if Tony will help him win her.

"I'll engage to whip her off to France, and you shall never hear more of her," Hastings says.

Tony replies: "Ecod, I will [help] to the last drop of my blood."

### **Act Three**

Mr. Hardcastle, meanwhile, is becoming more and more annoyed with Marlow for treating him like a lackey. Alone on the stage, Hardcastle laments, "He has taken possession of the easy-chair by the fire-side already. He took off his boots in the parlour, and desired me to see them taken care of. I'm desirous to know how his impudence affects my daughter."

Kate has been upstairs changing into casual clothes. When she comes down and talks with her father, she bemoans Marlow's incredible shyness while Hardcastle, in turn, complains about Marlow's rudeness. They wonder whether they are talking about the same person.

While they converse, Tony, who knows where his mother keeps everything, gets the casket of jewels Mrs. Hardcastle is holding for Constance and gives it to Hastings as an inducement for Hastings to run off with Constance. Later, Mrs. Hardcastle discovers it missing and thinks a robber is about.

Meanwhile, a maid tells Kate that Marlow believes he is at an inn. The maid also tells her that Marlow mistook Kate for a barmaid after she changed into her casual attire. Kate decides to keep up the charade, changing her voice and demeanor in Marlow's presence.

When he strikes up a conversation with her, he says she is "vastly handsome." Growing bold, he adds, "Suppose I should call for a taste, just by way of a trial, of the nectar of your lips." (To audiences attending the play, Marlow's bold behavior is not at all surprising, for they are aware that Marlow is a different man when in the presence of women of the servant class.) When old Hardcastle observes Kate and Marlow together, he sees Marlow seize Kate's hand and treat her like a milkmaid. He's thinking of turning Marlow out. When he makes his feelings known to Kate, she asks for an hour to convince her father that Marlow is not so bold and rude as her father believes he is. He agrees to her proposal.

### **Act Four**

The plot thickens at this point, for another visitor will shortly arrive—Marlow's father, Sir Charles Marlow. It seems Miss Neville happened on a letter to old Hardcastle in which Sir Charles announced that he would arrive at the Hardcastle home a few hours after his son made his appearance. When she tells George Hastings of Sir Charles's expected arrival at any minute, George worries that Sir Charles—who is aware of George's fondness for Constance—will somehow upset their plans to run off together. Constance asks whether the jewels are safe. George assures her they are, for he has sent the jewels, via a servant, to Marlow for safekeeping.

Unfortunately, unknown to Hastings, Marlow has told the servant to give the casket of jewels to the "landlady" for safekeeping. So the jewels are back where they were originally, in Mrs. Hardcastle's possession (as Miss Neville's guardian). Tony tells his mother a servant was responsible for misplacing them. Satisfied, she returns to the task of promoting a romance between Tony and Constance, unaware that Hastings and the young lady are plotting to abscond.

Marlow is by now captivated by the barmaid and says to himself, "She's mine, she must be mine."

Meanwhile, old Hardcastle has had enough of impudent Marlow and orders him to leave.

Marlow protests. Hardcastle rants and exits in a huff. When Kate enters, she realizes Marlow now knows something strange is going on, so she reveals that the inn is Hardcastle's house. However, she describes herself as a "relative"—a "poor relation" who helps out. As such, she knows, Marlow will continue to talk to her freely, since a "poor relation" is the same in standing as a barmaid. Marlow, shaken and deeply embarrassed, says, "To mistake this house of all others for an inn, and my father's old friend for an innkeeper! What a swaggering puppy must he take me for! What a silly puppy do I find myself!"

Marlow tells the "poor relation" that he will be leaving, in view of the circumstances, but notes that she has been the only positive thing that happened to him during the confusing and disconcerting ordeal. His words help to identify the feeling she felt for him when they met: love. Her scheme of posing as a barmaid/poor relation to find out his real feelings—a scheme in which she stooped to conquer—has proved wise.

Further mix-ups develop involving Miss Neville's jewels and Mr. Hastings' planned elopement with Constance. Tony is implicated as the trickster who set in motion the comedy of errors by telling Marlow and Hastings that the Hardcastle home was an inn.

### **Act Five**

When Sir Charles arrives, he and old Hardcastle have a laugh about the mix-ups, but Hardcastle tells Kate that he is still unconvinced that Marlow is anything but rude and insulting. To prove that Marlow is a worthy man, Kate enacts one final scene as the poor relative while Marlow converses with her and Sir Charles and Hardcastle listen behind a screen. In the end, Kate reveals her identity to Marlow, and everyone understands the mistakes of the evening.

But there is a further development: Old Hardcastle reveals that Tony is "of age"—and has been for three months, meaning he has a right now to make up his own mind about his future. Immediately, as his first act as his own man, Tony goes against his mother's wishes and refuses to marry Constance Neville, freeing her to marry Hastings—and qualifying her to receive the jewels. In the end, the young lovers—Kate and Marlow, Constance and Hastings—are betrothed.

Mrs. Hardcastle comments, "This is all but the whining end of a modern novel."

### **Style and Structure**

Goldsmith's style is wry, witty, and simple but graceful. From beginning to end, the play is both entertaining and easy to understand, presenting few words and idioms that modern audiences would not understand. It is also well constructed and moves along rapidly, the events of the first act—in particular, references to Tony Lumpkin's childhood propensity for working mischief and playing practical jokes—foreshadowing the events of the following acts.

There are frequent scene changes, punctuated by an occasional appearance of a character alone on the stage (*solus* in the stage directions) reciting a brief account of his feelings. In modern terms, the play is a page-turner for readers. Goldsmith observed the classical [unities](#) of time and place, for the action of the play takes place in single locale (the English countryside) on a single day.

## First Performance

Goldsmith completed the play in 1773. It was first performed at Covent Garden Theatre in London on March 15 of that year. It was well received. Over the last two centuries, it has become one of the most popular comedies in English literary history. It is still performed often today throughout the English-speaking world.

## Acting Approach

*She Stoops to Conquer* generally requires actors to deliver restrained, subtle performances for a production of the play to be successful. Overacting, typical in so many modern motion-picture comedies, can ruin the play. The best comedic actors—like Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Peter Ustinov, and Peter Sellers—use a straight face to bend people over with laughter.

## Themes

### Class Bias

Until Kate teaches him a lesson, Marlow responds to women solely on the basis of their status in society. He looks down on women of the lower class but is wholly at ease around them; he esteems women of the upper class but is painfully shy around them. Like the London society in which he was brought up, he assumes that all women of a certain class think and act according to artificial and arbitrary standards expected of that class. As for Mrs. Hardcastle, she appears to assess a person by the value of his or her possessions.

### Love Ignores Social Boundaries

Although prevailing attitudes among England's elite classes frown on romance between one of their own and a person of humble origin, Marlow can't help falling in love with a common "barmaid" (who is, of course, Kate in disguise).

### Hope for Flawed Humanity

Although Marlow makes a fool of himself as a result of his upper-class biases, Kate has enough common sense to see through the London hauteur encasing him and to appreciate him for his genuinely good qualities—which are considerable, once he allows them to surface. Also, Mrs. Hardcastle, in spite of her misguided values, enjoys the love of her practical, down-to-earth husband. He, too, is willing to look beyond her foibles in favor of her good points.

### Money Breeds Indolence

Tony Lumpkin will get 1,500 pounds a year when he comes of age. Thus, without financial worries, he devotes himself to ale and a do-nothing life.

## Climax

The climax occurs when Kate reveals her true identity to young Marlow while Hardcastle and

Sir Charles listen behind a screen.

***An Essay on the Theatre***  
***Or, a Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy***

By Oliver Goldsmith

Written in 1772

The theater, like all other amusements, has its fashions and its prejudices: and when satiated with its excellence mankind begin to mistake change for improvement. For some years tragedy was the reigning entertainment; but of late it has entirely given way to comedy, and our best efforts are now exerted in these lighter kinds of composition. The pompous train, the swelling phrase, and the unnatural rant, are displaced for that natural portrait of human folly and frailty, of which all are judges, because all have sat for the picture.

But as in describing nature it is presented with a double face, either of mirth or sadness, our modern writers find themselves at a loss which chiefly to copy from; and it is now debated, whether the exhibition of human distress is likely to afford the mind more entertainment than that of human absurdity?

Comedy is defined by Aristotle to be a picture of the frailties of the lower part of mankind, to distinguish it from tragedy, which is an exhibition of the misfortunes of the great. When comedy, therefore, ascends to produce the characters of princes or generals upon the stage, it is out of its walks, since low life and middle life are entirely its object. The principle question, therefore, is, whether, in describing low or middle life, an exhibition of its follies be not preferable to a detail of its calamities? Or, in other words, which deserves the preference,—the weeping sentimental comedy so much in fashion at present, or the laughing, and even low comedy, which seems to have been last exhibited by Vanbrugh and Cibber?

If we apply to authorities, all the great masters of the dramatic art have but one opinion. Their rule is, that as tragedy displays the calamities of the great, so comedy should excite our laughter by ridiculously exhibiting the follies of the lower part of mankind. Boileau, one of the best modern critics, asserts that comedy will not admit of tragic distress:—

Le comique, ennemi des soupirs et des pleurs,  
N'admet point dans ses vers de tragiques douleurs.

Nor is this rule without the strongest foundation in nature, as the distresses of the mean by no means affect us so strongly as the calamities of the great. When tragedy exhibits to us some great man fallen from his height, and struggling with want and adversity, we feel his situation in the same manner as we suppose he himself must feel, and our pity is increased in proportion to the height from which he fell. On the contrary, we do not so strongly sympathize with one born in humbler circumstances, and encountering accidental distress: so that while we melt for Belisarius, we scarcely give halfpence to the beggar who accosts us in the street. The one has our pity, the other our contempt. Distress, therefore, is the proper object of tragedy, since the great excite our pity by their fall; but not equally so of comedy, since the actors employed in it are originally so mean, that they sink but little by their fall.

Since the first origin of the stage, tragedy and comedy have run in distinct channels, and never till of late encroached upon the provinces of each other. Terence, who seems to have made the nearest approaches, always judiciously stops short before he comes to the downright pathetic; and yet he is even reproached by Caesar for wanting the *vis comica*. All the other comic writers of antiquity aim only at rendering folly or vice ridiculous, but never exalt their characters into buskined pomp, or make what Voltaire humorously calls a tradesman's tragedy.

Yet notwithstanding this weight of authority, and the universal practice of former ages, a new species of dramatic composition has been introduced, under the name of sentimental comedy, in which the virtues of private life are exhibited, rather than the vices exposed; and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the piece. These comedies have had of late great success, perhaps from their novelty, and also from their flattering everyman in his favorite foible. In these plays almost all the characters are good, and exceedingly generous; they are lavish enough of their tin money on the stage; and though they want humor, have abundance of sentiment and feeling. If they happen to have faults or foibles, the spectator is taught, not only to pardon, but to applaud them, in consideration of the goodness of their hearts; so that folly, instead of being ridiculed, is commended, and the comedy aims at touching our passions without the power of being truly pathetic. In this manner we are likely to lose one great source of entertainment on the stage; for while the comic poet is invading the province of the tragic muse, he leaves her lovely sister quite neglected. Of this, however, he is no way solicitous, as he measures his fame by his profits.

But it will be said, that the theater is formed to amuse mankind, and that it matters little, if this end be answered, by what means it is obtained. If mankind find delight in weeping at comedy, it would be cruel to abridge them in that or any other innocent pleasure. If those pieces are denied by the name of comedies, yet call them by any other name and, if they are delightful, they are good. Their success, it will be said, is a mark of their merit, and it is only abridging our happiness to deny us an inlet to amusement.

These objections, however, are rather specious than solid. It is true that amusement is a great object of the theater, and it will be allowed that these sentimental pieces do often amuse us; but the question is, whether the true comedy would not amuse us more? The question is, whether a character supported throughout a piece, with its ridicule still attending, would not give us more delight than this species of bastard tragedy, which only is applauded because it is new?

A friend of mine, who was sitting unmoved at one of these sentimental pieces, was asked how he could be so indifferent? "Why, truly," says he, "as the hero is but a tradesman, it is indifferent to me whether he be turned out of his counting-house on Fish Street Hill, since he will still have enough to open shop in St. Giles'."

The other objection is as ill-grounded; for though we should give these pieces another name, it will not mend their efficacy. It will continue a kind of mulish production, with all the defects of its opposite parents, and marked with sterility. If we are permitted to make comedy weep, we have an equal right to make tragedy laugh, and to set down in blank verse the jests and repartees of all the attendants in a funeral procession.

But there is one argument in favor of sentimental comedy, which will keep it on the stage, in



spite of all that can be said against it. It is, of all others, the most easily written. Those abilities that can hammer out a novel are fully sufficient for the production of a sentimental comedy. It is only sufficient to raise the characters a little; to deck out the hero with a riband, or give the heroine a title; then to put an insipid dialogue, without character or humor, into their mouths, give them mighty good hearts, very fine clothes, furnish a new set of scenes, make a pathetic scene or two, with a sprinkling of tender melancholy conversation through the whole, and there is no doubt but all the ladies will cry and all the gentlemen applaud.

Humor at present seems to be departing from the stage, and it will soon happen that our comic players will have nothing left for it but a fine coat and a song. It depends upon the audience whether they will actually drive those poor merry creatures from the stage, or sit at a play as gloomy as at the Tabernacle. It is not easy to recover an art when once lost; and it will be but a just punishment, that when, by our being too fastidious, we have banished humor from the stage, we should ourselves be deprived of the art of laughing.

### Author Information

*She Stoops to Conquer* was written by Oliver Goldsmith (1730?-1774), a playwright, novelist, poet, and essayist. His most memorable novel is *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). His most memorable poems are "The Traveller" (1764) and "The Deserted Village" (1770). He was an excellent writer who was admired by the greatest authors of his day.

Goldsmith was born in Ireland as the son of an Anglican minister. After graduating from Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, he studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and the University of Leiden in The Netherlands. Then he roamed Europe, eking out a living by playing the flute and begging. After arriving in England in 1756, he worked as an apothecary's helper, a physician, an assistant teacher at a school, a translator of texts, and an author of magazine and newspaper articles. After establishing his reputation as a major writer, he spent his money just as quickly as he made it, gambling frequently, and was almost always in debt. Though a polished writer, he was a clumsy conversationalist. Though many of his fictional characters were attractive and desirable, he himself was homely, vain, socially inept, and a poor manager of his business affairs. Samuel Johnson—the great essayist, poet, critic, and lexicographer—said of him, "No man was more foolish when he had not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he had" (qtd. in "Goldsmith, Oliver." *Britannica 2001 on CD-ROM*).

### Study Questions and Essay Topics

- Research the life of Goldsmith. Then determine to what extent the personality of Marlow reflects the personality of Goldsmith.
- Specifically, what incidents or scenes in the play most effectively poke fun at the class-consciousness of the English?
- What is the most glaring fault of each of the main characters?
- What redeeming qualities do the characters have?
- Why does Tony despise Constance Neville? Is the reason that his mother chose her for him? Or are there other reasons?

- What are the key mix-ups on which the plot depends?
- Which role in the play do you think poses the greatest challenge for an actor? Explain your answer.
- Write an expository essay focusing on Goldsmith's considerable influence on playwrights of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Identify several of the playwrights and explain in what way Goldsmith influenced them.
- Write an expository essay informing readers of what a typical English theatre was like in the 1700's.