

Reality vs. Appearance in *She Stoops to Conquer*

Appearance vs. reality is an important theme in *She Stoops To Conquer* and is the source of much of the play's humor. Indeed, the title of the play itself illustrates the dominant theme. Kate needs to "stoop" (i.e., pretend to be a woman of low status) in order to "conquer" young Marlow, who despite his ease in the company of lower-class women, becomes hopelessly tongue-tied in the presence of ladies of the higher classes like Kate.

In his portrayal of the relationship between Kate and young Marlow, Goldsmith is satirizing established social conventions. Appearance is all in this society. Though Marlow clearly has feelings for Kate, he cannot marry her; after all, he thinks she's just a barmaid and, as such, his social inferior. This is a society in which status is more important in relationships than love or affection.

Goldsmith also presents reality as being largely dependent on perspective. Take Tony Lumpkin, for example. He greatly enjoys spending time at the local tavern, socializing with various unsavory characters. But to the lower classes among whom he mixes, he's still seen as socially superior, despite his gregariousness and penchant for playing practical jokes. Yet at the same time, other members of his class see him as beneath them. Each group has constructed their own reality as to Tony's real class identity.

It says a lot about this society that people constantly need to resort to deception in order to conform to other's expectations. It is this pervasive level of deception that gives rise to a good deal of confusion in the play as to the precise boundary between appearance and reality. Deception also corrupts and subverts one's character. Much humor is derived from Mr. Hardcastle's instructions to his servants to act as if they're used to receiving guests. This is all the more amusing as Mr. Hardcastle is someone who expresses open contempt for the pretensions of the town's social life. In such a society, with all its fakery and pretension, reality is largely an artificial construct, making it all too easy to subvert. And this leads to considerable confusion and amusement in fairly equal measure.