

She Stoops to Conquer: Character Analysis

Kate Hardcastle

An intelligent, good-humored, sensible, and beautiful young woman, Kate is confident in her own merits and appreciative of the good in those around her. She loves and respects her father, Hardcastle, and humors him by dressing in the old-fashioned manner he prefers half the time. Although she is interested in the fashions of her day, she does not define herself by how she dresses, but takes a flexible attitude towards self-presentation. Kate is at the age when most women of her time look for a husband, and she is interested in finding someone handsome and intelligent and settling down, so she is excited when her father tells her that Marlow, the son of his oldest friend, will pay them a visit to make her acquaintance. Kate is perceptive and able to think on her feet, so when she learns that Marlow is shy around women of his own class but bold around lower-class women—and, what's more, has mistaken her in her old-fashioned dress for a barmaid—she quickly turns the situation to her advantage and begins impersonating a member of the lower class. Kate's decision to pretend to be a member of the lower class to win Marlow's heart is the "stooping" referred to in the play's title. This stratagem succeeds in helping Kate and Marlow to get to know one another and learn that they like each other, and enables Kate to "conquer" by winning Marlow's heart and his hand in marriage.

Charles Marlow

An aristocratic, well-educated, and handsome young man, Marlow has spent little time in polite society, instead spending much of his upbringing at school and in international travel. As a result, he lacks self-confidence in social settings and freezes up around women of his own class, who make him incredibly nervous. He often opts instead for seducing lower-class women, with whom he finds it easier to converse, as they do not intimidate him. Marlow arrives at Hardcastle's home with his best friend, Hastings, having agreed to meet Kate Hardcastle and assess the prospect of marriage. However, he arrives at the Hardcastle's home thinking that it is an inn, having been misdirected by Tony, and the process of untangling the complex mess of misunderstandings that ensues makes up the bulk of the play's plot. Marlow falls in love with

Kate over several meetings during which he feels comfortable around her because he thinks her to be of lower class, and by the end of the play they are engaged to marry. In this way, Marlow finds love with a woman of his own class despite his crippling shyness, thereby proving Tony's initial, playful deception of Marlow to have been a fateful and fortunate twist.

Constance Neville

A young woman of marriageable age, Constance is kind, affectionate, and practical. Since the death of her father, her aunt—Mrs. Hardcastle, who wants Constance to marry her son Tony—has served as her guardian. Constance is in love with Hastings but does not want to marry without her aunt's permission because this would mean forgoing the jewels she is supposed to inherit. She tries to deceive her aunt in various ways that she hopes will help her to escape her guardian's control, but to no avail. Constance is a cultured and cultivated woman and therefore unlikely to be a good match for the rascally Tony. Her name suggests an association with the city, not the countryside, because (in French) “né” means “born” and “ville” means “town.” Thus, in the play's dramatized opposition between the provincial and the cosmopolitan, Constance's character is aligned with the cosmopolitan. Although Constance doesn't want to marry Tony, she appreciates his good qualities. By the end of the play, she has secured her inheritance and is engaged to marry Hastings, just as she had hoped.

George Hastings

Fashionable, well-educated, and good-natured, Hastings is Marlow's best friend and Constance's suitor. Unlike Marlow, he is unconstrained in social situations and doesn't take fashion too seriously. Hastings hopes to encourage Marlow to gain confidence so that he can build a real relationship with a woman he respects. Hastings is a romantic, willing to give up Constance's fortune to marry her immediately. Desperate to elope with Constance while he has the chance, he enlists Tony's help in deceiving Mrs. Hardcastle. Hastings name is suggestive of his character in that he wants to marry Constance with haste; he refuses to wait, even if it means that Constance forfeits her fortune.

Mr. Hardcastle

An old-fashioned gentleman who owns an old house in the countryside, Hardcastle is stuck in his ways and despises modern trends. He fought in the War of Spanish Succession and likes to tell stories of his time during the war. He is protective of his daughter, Kate, indulgent to his wife, Mrs. Hardcastle, and disapproves of his unpolished and rowdy stepson, Tony. Even though he dislikes modern society and leads a relatively isolated life, he does not wish to be thought of as an irrelevant old fogey. Hardcastle expects to be treated with respect by everyone he meets, so he is appalled by the ill-treatment he receives from his friend Sir Charles's son, Marlow. Hardcastle may be eccentric, but he is fair-minded. Therefore, when he sees that his wife's lies are preventing Tony, Constance, and Hastings from finding happiness, he reveals the truth they need to know to be freed to make their own ways in the world without her interference.

Mrs. Hardcastle

A vain, greedy, sentimental, and manipulative woman, Mrs. Hardcastle has lived all her life in the countryside but is obsessed with what is fashionable in the city. She has spoiled her son Tony and hopes to control him for as long as possible, even going so far as to lie to him about his age in order to keep him under her thumb. She is the guardian to her niece, Constance, whose father and mother are dead, and hopes to force her to marry Tony to keep Constance's fortune in the family.

Tony Lumpkin, Esquire

Clever but uneducated and rustic, Tony Lumpkin is sick of his mother Mrs. Hardcastle's domineering personality and eager for the time when he will inherit a substantial fortune and be able to act more independently. Tony was never sent to school as a child, because his mother considered him too sickly, although it seems that this may have only been in her imagination. He passes his time by drinking with lower-class men from the area, making up humorous songs, and playing pranks on his family members, especially his stepfather Hardcastle, who disapproves of Tony's behavior. Tony wants to marry a rustic woman from the area, Bet Bouncer, but his mother hopes to convince him to marry his cousin, Constance—which would keep Constance's fortune in the family. Even though Tony is less cultivated than the other characters, he has great stores of natural intelligence. Although his jokes are sometimes crude, he also uses pranks as an equalizer, to prove those who think they are better than him wrong.

Aunt Pedigree

Constance's aunt who lives a two-hour drive from the Hardcastles. Mrs. Hardcastle intends to send Constance to Aunt Pedigree when she learns that Constance plans to elope with Hastings, but Tony drives Constance and Mrs. Hardcastle in circles and they never arrive, so Aunt Pedigree never appears onstage. Aunt Pedigree's name is suggestive of her role: she is meant to protect the family pedigree from marriages that do not get family approval.