

Oliver Goldsmith, (1730 -1774) born in London, Anglo-Irish essayist, poet, novelist, dramatist, and eccentric, made famous by such works as the series of essays *The Citizen of the World, or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher* (1762), the poem *The Deserted Village* (1770), the novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), and the play *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773).

Legacy of Oliver Goldsmith

When Oliver Goldsmith died he had achieved eminence among the writers of his time as an essayist, a poet, and a dramatist. He was one “who left scarcely any kind of writing untouched and who touched nothing that he did not adorn”—such was the judgment expressed by his friend Dr. Johnson. His contemporaries were as one in their high regard for Goldsmith the writer, but they were of different minds concerning the man himself. He was, they all agreed, one of the oddest personalities of his time. Of established Anglo-Irish stock, he kept his brogue and his provincial manners in the midst of the sophisticated Londoners among whom he moved. His bearing was undistinguished, and he was unattractive physically—ugly, some called him—with ill-proportioned features and a pock-marked face. He was a poor manager of his own affairs and an inveterate gambler, wildly extravagant when in funds, generous sometimes beyond his means to people in distress. The graceful fluency with words that he commanded as a writer deserted him totally when he was in society—his conversational mishaps were memorable things. Instances were also cited of his incredible vanity, of his constant desire to be conspicuous in company, and of his envy of others’ achievements. In the end what most impressed Goldsmith’s contemporaries was the paradox he presented to the world: on the one hand the assured and polished literary artist, on the other the person notorious for his ineptitudes in and out of society. Again it was Johnson who summed up the common sentiment. “No man,” he declared, “was more foolish when he had not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he had.”

Goldsmith’s success as a writer lay partly in the charm of personality emanated by his style—his affection for his characters, his mischievous irony, and his spontaneous interchange of gaiety and sadness. He was, as a writer, “natural, simple, affecting.” It is by their human personalities that his novel and his plays succeed, not by any brilliance of plot, ideas, or language. In the poems again it is the characters that are remembered rather than the landscapes—the village parson, the village schoolmaster, the sharp, yet not unkindly portraits of Garrick and Burke. Goldsmith’s poetry lives by its own special softening and mellowing of the traditional heroic couplet into simple melodies that are quite different in character from the solemn and sweeping lines of 18th-century blank verse. In his novel and plays Goldsmith helped to humanize his era’s literary imagination, without growing sickly or mawkish. Goldsmith saw people, human situations, and indeed the human predicament from the comic point of view; he was a realist, something of a satirist, but in his final judgments unfailingly charitable.