

# SENTIMENTAL COMEDY

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DEGREE → I (English Hons)  
Paper - I Group - C

Sentimental Comedy is a significant trend in the history of English drama. It is a kind of drama prevailing in England between the Restoration Comedy and the Comedy of Laughter. Pioneered by Goldsmith and Sheridan. Sentimental Comedy an early 18<sup>th</sup> century event, came into existence as a reaction against the immorality and vulgarity of the Restoration comedy. The socialism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Hobbes's theory reducing man to animal for his innate selfishness are the other two factors forming the backdrop of sentimental comedy.

Sentimental Comedy is also known as the Drama of Sensibility. It was patronized by the middle class, written for the middle class and, therefore, it eulogises the virtues of the middle class. It was characterized by pathos, delicacy and refined sentiments. The characters were not real men and women but abstractions conceived in the mind of the dramatist. Virtue was exalted and vice punished and thus moral was preached through them. Allardyce Nicoll in British drama writes that sentimental comedy presented in place of laughter tears in place of rogues and gallants and witty demurets, pathetic heroines and serious lovers and honest servants, and in place of intrigue, melodramatic and distressing situation. Wit, humour and sparkling dialogues were conspicuous by their absence. The dramatists



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Who wrote sentimental comedies are Colley Cibber, Richard Steele, Mrs Centlivre, Hugh Kelly and Richard Cumberland.

Colley Cibber (1671-1757) is the first dramatist associated with sentimental comedy. His plays are rich in sentimentality but deficient in wit. However, there is a visible attempt to purify the play from the licentiousness of the Restoration Comedy. His reputation as a playwright won him the coveted post of poet Laureate in 1730. *The Careless Husband* and *Lovers Last Shift* are his own successful plays.

Mrs Centlivre (1667-1723) *The Wife of Queen Anne's Cook*. has the reputation of over sentimentalising the plays in order to feed the popular appetite of the theatre goers. She wrote a number of plays which *The Busy Body* & *The Wonder A Woman keeps a Secret* are the best known.

Richard Steele (1672-1729) is known as the real founder of sentimental comedy. His plays do retain some of the moods of the manners comedy but they all end in edifying conclusions. His chief comedies are: *The Funeral*, *The Lying Lover*, *The Tender Husband* & *The Conscionable Lovers*. In these plays he preaches violently against the stale immorality of the Restoration Comedy. He practised in drama what he preached in his essays. It was Steele alone who did something to comedy to compensate for what it had lost. He injected into comedy earnestness of

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sentiment and even of social concern that is in tune with his own personal sympathy and warmth of temperament. (D. Laiches) - Steele served as a pioneer and partially supplied the models for Goldsmith and Sheridan.

The contribution of Richard Cumberland and Hugh Kelly are too meagre to be detailed. However, 'The West Indian' by Cumberland and Kelly's 'The school for Wives' are very well known plays.

Sentimental Comedy sadly lacked in the comic spirit. "Characters are wanting in humour" remarked Goldsmith. The sentimental effusions and utter lack of comic spirit of the Sentimental Comedy generated a reaction which was spearheaded by Goldsmith and Sheridan leading to a new trend 'The True Comedy of Laughter'.

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