

The Rivals : An Antisentimental Comedy

'Sentimentalism' in drama in the eighteenth century banished laughter from its legitimate place and introduced tears to fill the vacuum. The Sentimental drama simply revelled in the excess of pathos and tearful situation. The playwrights of this genre aimed to bring the audience to tears, not laughter. It appeals especially to our feelings of sorrow, pity and compassionate sympathy. Richard Steele was pioneer of Sentimental Comedy who wrote 'The Conscious Lover' as the most famous work of this genre.

Anti-Sentimental Comedy is a reaction against Sentimental Comedy. Oliver Goldsmith, who is regarded as the pioneer of antisentimental comedy, criticizes it in his essay - 'Essay on the Theatre' or 'A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy'. He writes that the true function of a comedy was to give a humorous exhibition of the follies and vices of men and women and to rectify them by exciting laughter. Goldsmith opposed sentimental comedy because in place of laughter and humour, it provided tears and distressing situations, pathetic lovers, serious heroines and honest servants. His work 'She Stoops to Conquer' is written as a reaction against Sentimental Comedy.

R.B. Sheridan was another great writer of 18th Century who revolted against the trends of

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Sentimental Comedy. He declared an open revolt against the systematic attempts of advocates of the Sentimental Comedy to kill the comic muse. His works like 'The School for Scandal', 'The Rivals' and 'The Critic' all three revolted against sentimental comedy with greater force.

Sheridan's 'The Rivals' is regarded as an anti-sentimental comedy. It is a comedy in which the playwright portrays sentimental characters and situations in such a way that they arouse laughter in the audience. Thus the author does not provide tears but funny feeling in the heart of audience. 'The Rivals' certainly mirrors the manners of the contemporary eighteenth century society, particularly the fashionable upper class life of Bath. The life lived at Bath was a gay life of intrigues, gossips, scandals, flirtations and frivolity. Sheridan focuses upon some of the contemporary fashions which makes us laugh. When Bob Acres comes to Bath, he decides to discard his country clothes and to dress himself according to the fashion prevailing in the city. The scenes between Faulkland and Julia are satire on the sentimental comedy which was in fashion in those days and against which Sheridan revolted. Faulkland is also presented as the 'most teasing, captious, incorrigible lover'. Faulkland's own description of his state of mind about his beloved Julia also create laughter. Julia loves Faulkland who is an incorrigible sentimentalist. He is full of doubts about the sincerity of his beloved. He nourishes a number of doubts about the singleness and loyalty of Julia. The result is that Julia has to pass

many unhappy days and night and is made to shed tears. Everytime Faulkland meets Julia, he finds occasion to quarrel with her and Julia has to leave him with tears when she is unable to bear the excess of her lover. Faulkland blames and degrades him when thinking of and waiting for Julia in her dressing room. He thinks - "I am ever ungenerously fretful and madly capricious! I am conscious of it - yet I cannot correct myself!"

Julia also shows excessive sentimentality in her love affair. Lydia calls her 'slave' to Faulkland and says: "Yet have you... Been a slave to caprice, the whim, the jealousy of this ungrateful Faulkland who will ever delay assuming the right of a husband, while you suffer him to be equally imperious as a lover." But Julia accepts him as a noble, generous and proud person and says that even if she had not been in love with him before, she would have loved him only for saving her life in water and his being a good swimmer. Thus, Sheridan attacks her sentimentality through Lydia who surprises if a water spaniel would have saved her! And who comments - "I should never think of giving my heart to a man because he could swim!"

Apart from Julia and Faulkland, there are other characters also who serve Sheridan's anti-sentimental purpose. Mrs Malaprop, a widow is looking for another husband. But she does not allow Lydia love. Lydia loves a poor, penniless, beggarly young man Ensign Beverly. She herself loves and wants to

marry an Irish Baronet Sir Lucius O' Trigger. She carries her love with him in the name Delia. When Sir Lucius O' Trigger comes to know that his lovely Delia is Mrs. Malaprop, he rejects her offer of love and marriage saying; "You, Delia - Pho! Pho! be easy." He then asks Bob Acres to marry her But Bob Acres also refuses to marry her. At this stage, Sir Anthony Absolute consoles her by saying:

"Come, Mrs Malaprop, don't be cast down - you are bloom yet."

Replying to him sharply she says,

"Oh, Sir Antony - men are all barborous."

Thus, Sheridan's *The Rivals* ridicules and attacks the sentimental comedies. The playwright creates the situation in such a way that the emotions and sentiments of the characters do not create tears but laughter. So, we can say that "*The Rivals*" is an anti-sentimental play.