

B.A. (English-Hons)

Part - I

Paper - I

Factors responsible for the decline of drama during the eighteenth century

During the eighteenth century drama steadily declined. Only a few remarkable dramatists shine out during this age. Goldsmith and Sheridan were the two prominent figures who continued to enrich dramatic literature by their production, otherwise there was hardly any dramatist of the calibre of the Restoration or the Elizabethan dramatists during this age. In order to understand the reasons for the decline of drama during this period we shall have to study the social and literary background of the age. The main characteristics and conditions which were responsible for the decline of drama during this age are the following :-

- **The Rise of the Novel :-** Drama declined during the Eighteenth century because the novel gained in popularity. The rise of the novel displaced the drama. It was the novel which had become truly representative; free from most of the conventions which burdened the theatre, it succeeded better in depicting life, manners

and ideas. It attracted those serious spirits which since Puritan times had looked upon plays with suspicion.

The Age of Players :- During this age actors and actresses were more important than the playwright. People were more attracted towards the performance of actors like Garrick and actresses like Mrs Siddons and they never bothered about the qualities of the plays that were being produced. The public was chiefly drawn to the theatre by the fame of actors and actresses. Such interests of public discouraged writers to produce good plays. Hence throughout the age the most mediocre kinds of plays were produced.

The Revival of old plays :- The revival of old plays hindered the creation of new plays. The plays of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher were revived. "The treatment which some of Shakespeare's plays now received on the stage is conclusive evidence of the inability of the age to appreciate and therefore to produce great tragedy. This revival of old plays gave no incentive to writers of the age to produce new plays. Perhaps they thought the writing of new plays would be a futile effort since people of the age were more interested in the revival of old plays than in the creation of new ones."

Lack of support from the Court :- Drama declined during this age because it failed to receive the support of the King. William III was no patron of the theatre, nor was Queen Anne; nor were the first two Georges. Without the support of the King

it was difficult for dramatists to make their influence felt in the public of the day.

Moral Restraint :- During this age dramatists were debarred from indulging in the presentation of obscene scenes and they had not that freedom which the writers of the Comedy of Manners enjoyed. It was Collier who inaugurated the moral reform in the drama and with his advent the audience felt that drama should only be written on lines of moral edification. Naturally the scope of drama became restricted. Instead of the broad humour of Comedy writers of the preceding age, sentiment began to have its way in the world of Comedy. The Comedies of this period, as a matter of fact, bordered on sentimentality and everything that seemed to have the tone of fun and humour was regarded as a matter of distaste by the public. It was a day of great significance in the history of eighteenth century drama when Goldsmith and Sheridan broke new ground by writing the Comedy of Humours and by setting their face against the sentimental Comedy of this age.

- Moral restraint was followed by political restraint. As a result of the freedom with which Fielding and others attacked Walpole's government, a Licensing Act was passed in 1737, confirming and strengthening the powers of censorship already possessed by the Lord Chamberlain. As a result of this Licensing Act, dramatists were restrained from writing plays in which there was the slightest reflection

on the political figures of this age. That political tinge which the former dramatists had given to their plays could not be allowed in the changed atmosphere vis-a-vis the Licensing Act.