

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF ROLAND BARTHES ON OLIVER GOLDSMITH'S DRAMA TEXT *SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER*

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Abstract

The study aims to identify the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in selected dialogues and to examine the social and cultural ideologies represented through these signs. Through a qualitative research design incorporating textual analysis, this study analyzes five purposively sampled dialogues as its primary data. The data gathering involved a close reading process, followed by an analysis structured around Barthes' three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that the dialogues function as signifying practices that construct and naturalize dominant ideologies concerning tradition and modernity, popular culture, social hierarchy, class privilege, and gender morality. At the denotative level, the dialogues portray ordinary interactions among characters. At the connotative level, they symbolize broader social meanings related to identity, power, and morality. At the mythic level, they reproduce and simultaneously challenge cultural assumptions that were widely accepted in eighteenth-century England. Through irony, humor, and mistaken identity, Goldsmith exposes the artificiality of social distinctions and critiques the ideological foundations of class and gender relations. The study concludes that *She Stoops to Conquer* functions not only as a comedy of manners but also as a site where cultural meanings and dominant ideologies are represented, negotiated, and contested. These findings contribute to the development of literary semiotics and deepen the understanding of ideology and signification in English drama.

Keywords: Semiotics, Roland Barthes, *She Stoops to Conquer*, English drama

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary works function not only as artistic expressions but also as cultural texts that embody social values, ideologies, and systems of meaning. Through language, literary texts construct representations of reality and reveal how individuals negotiate their identities and social relationships. Literature, therefore, serves as a medium through which societies preserve, reproduce, and contest cultural beliefs and social norms. Drama, in particular, occupies a unique position among literary genres because it presents social experiences primarily through dialogues and interactions among characters. These dialogues are not merely communicative devices but also signs that reflect cultural assumptions and ideological structures embedded within society. Recent literary studies have emphasized that literary texts should be understood as discursive spaces where meanings are produced and contested through representation and cultural codes (Hall, 2021; Tyson, 2023). Likewise, contemporary scholars argue that literary discourse operates as a site of ideological negotiation, enabling texts to represent social identities and power relations while simultaneously challenging dominant cultural narratives (Zhang & Wang, 2024, 2024). Consequently, literary works should be approached not only as aesthetic products but also as systems of signification that encode historical and cultural meanings.

Among eighteenth-century English dramas, *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith remains one of the most celebrated comedies of manners. First performed in 1773, the play narrates

a series of misunderstandings involving Charles Marlow, Kate Hardcastle, Tony Lumpkin, and other characters whose interactions revolve around issues of courtship, mistaken identity, and family relationships. Beneath its humorous surface, however, the play offers a satirical portrayal of eighteenth-century English society, exposing tensions between urban and rural values, social hierarchy, gender expectations, and class consciousness. According to recent scholarship, Goldsmith's comedy represents a critique of the artificial manners and social pretensions that characterized the English upper classes during the eighteenth century (Abootalebi & Mofid, 2022; Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Moreover, contemporary studies have noted that the play reveals the instability of social identity and exposes the contradictions underlying the hierarchical structures of eighteenth-century England (Ali & Rehman, 2024; Kumar, 2025). Consequently, *She Stoops to Conquer* should not be regarded merely as a romantic comedy but also as a social commentary on the ideological values governing English society.

Previous studies on *She Stoops to Conquer* have primarily concentrated on characterization, comedy, and social criticism. Abubakar et al. (2022) studied the social criticism of this play. Meanwhile, Abootalebi & Mofid (2022) investigated the play from the perspective of social satire and demonstrated how Goldsmith employed humor to criticize class distinctions and aristocratic values. Similarly, Khan & Ahmed (2023) argued that the play reflects the social transformation of eighteenth-century England and highlights the tension between traditional and emerging values. Ali & Rehman (2024) further examined the play's representation of identity and social mobility, emphasizing the role of mistaken identity in undermining established class boundaries. Although these studies have successfully revealed the sociocultural dimensions of the play, they have paid relatively little attention to the mechanisms through which meanings are constructed and naturalized within the dialogues themselves. More importantly, previous studies have largely overlooked the signifying processes that operate at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Therefore, there remains a need to examine the play from a semiotic perspective to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in its language and symbolic expressions. Such an investigation is particularly important because dramatic dialogues serve not only to advance the plot but also to communicate ideological assumptions and cultural values.

Semiotics provides an appropriate framework for investigating how meanings are produced within literary texts. As a discipline concerned with signs and signification, semiotics assumes that meanings are not inherent in objects or utterances but are generated through cultural conventions and systems of representation. Recent developments in literary semiotics emphasize that signs are inseparable from ideology and power because they shape how individuals perceive and interpret reality (Bouvier, 2022; Copley & Randviir, 2023). Among various semiotic theories, Roland Barthes' model has been particularly influential in literary and cultural studies because of its emphasis on multiple levels of meaning. Barthes (1977, 1991) proposes that signs operate through three interconnected levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, whereas connotation concerns the associative and symbolic meanings generated by cultural contexts. At the deepest level, myth represents ideological meanings that transform historically and culturally constructed values into seemingly natural truths. Recent studies have demonstrated the continuing relevance of Barthes' theory in revealing hidden ideologies in literary texts, films, advertisements, and digital media (Bouvier, 2022; Copley & Randviir, 2023; Pratiwi, 2025). Likewise, Fitriani & Hidayat (2024) contend that Barthes' concept of myth remains particularly useful for examining the relationship between language, culture, and ideology in literary narratives.

Several recent studies have employed Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze literature and cultural representations. Bouvier (2022) argues that Barthes' concept of myth remains essential for understanding how cultural meanings become normalized and accepted as common sense. Likewise, Copley & Randviir (2023) emphasize that semiotic analysis enables researchers to uncover the relationship between signs, ideology, and power embedded in textual practices. Similar findings have

been reported by Fitriani & Hidayat (2024), who demonstrate that literary texts function as systems of signification through which ideological values are transmitted and negotiated. These perspectives suggest that literary dialogues are not neutral linguistic expressions but rather signifying practices that reflect and reproduce cultural values. Consequently, examining the dialogues in *She Stoops to Conquer* through Barthes' framework provides an opportunity to reveal the ideological assumptions underlying class relations, gender norms, and social identities represented in the play.

The present study focuses on five selected dialogues from *She Stoops to Conquer* that represent significant themes, namely the conflict between tradition and modernity, popular culture, social hierarchy, class privilege, and gender morality. By applying Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, this study seeks to investigate how meanings are constructed within these dialogues and how they reflect the social and cultural ideologies of eighteenth-century England. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research question: How are denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings constructed in the selected dialogues of *She Stoops to Conquer*, and what social and cultural ideologies do they represent? Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to literary semiotics by demonstrating that Goldsmith's play functions not only as a comedy of manners but also as a site where dominant ideologies are represented, negotiated, and challenged. Furthermore, the study seeks to enrich contemporary discussions on the applicability of Barthes' semiotic theory to eighteenth-century literary texts and to provide further insights into the ideological dimensions of English drama.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a semiotic approach based on the theory of Roland Barthes. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the study aimed to interpret meanings embedded in textual signs rather than to measure phenomena quantitatively. Specifically, the research adopted textual analysis to investigate how meanings are constructed and conveyed through the dialogues in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*.

The primary source of data was the text of *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith, first performed in 1773. The data consisted of selected dialogues that represent major themes and ideological issues in the play. Five quotations were purposively selected because they illustrate significant aspects of eighteenth-century English society, including the conflict between tradition and modernity, popular and elite culture, class superiority, social hierarchy, and gender relations. Thus, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected excerpts contained rich semiotic elements relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data collection was conducted through close reading and note-taking techniques. The researcher repeatedly read the text to identify dialogues containing signs and symbolic expressions that potentially reflect social and cultural meanings. The selected quotations were subsequently classified according to their thematic relevance and significance to the study.

The data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' model of signification, which consists of three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth (1991). At the denotative level, the literal meaning of each quotation was identified. At the connotative level, the symbolic and implied meanings associated with the dialogues were interpreted. Finally, at the mythic level, the study examined the broader ideological assumptions and cultural values embedded within the text. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, the findings were further interpreted within the social and cultural context of eighteenth-century England.

The analytical procedure involved several stages. First, relevant quotations were selected from the play. Second, each quotation was examined to determine its denotative meaning. Third, the connotative meanings were identified to reveal the symbolic significance of the dialogues. Fourth, the myths underlying the text were analyzed to uncover the dominant ideologies represented in the

play. Finally, the results were interpreted in relation to the historical and cultural context of eighteenth-century English society. Through this procedure, the study sought to demonstrate how *She Stoops to Conquer* functions not only as a comedy of manners but also as a medium through which social values, cultural identities, and ideological structures are represented and contested.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Synopsis of *She Stoops to Conquer*

The story centers on Charles Marlow, a young gentleman known for his politeness and education. His father arranges for him to meet Kate Hardcastle, the daughter of Mr. Hardcastle, in the hope that they will eventually marry. Although Marlow is confident when interacting with women of lower social standing, he becomes extremely shy and awkward in the presence of women whom he considers respectable.

While traveling to the Hardcastle residence with his friend George Hastings, Marlow encounters Tony Lumpkin, Mrs. Hardcastle's stepson. As a prank, Tony deliberately misleads them into believing that the Hardcastle house is an inn. Because of this misunderstanding, Marlow treats Mr. Hardcastle as if he were an innkeeper, leaving Mr. Hardcastle puzzled and offended by his guest's behavior.

Meanwhile, Hastings is in love with Constance Neville, Kate's cousin, who lives with the Hardcastle family. However, Mrs. Hardcastle intends to arrange a marriage between Constance and Tony Lumpkin in order to keep the family inheritance within the household. Since Tony has no interest in the marriage, he instead helps Hastings and Constance be together.

Kate Hardcastle soon discovers that Marlow has two contrasting personalities: he is extremely shy with respectable women but relaxed and self-assured with women he perceives as belonging to a lower social class. In order to understand Marlow's true character and win his affection, Kate disguises herself as an ordinary woman. Through this disguise, Marlow gradually reveals his genuine personality and eventually falls in love with her.

A series of misunderstandings, disguises, and comic intrigues finally comes to an end when Kate's true identity is revealed and the confusion regarding the Hardcastle house is resolved. It is also discovered that Tony Lumpkin has reached the age at which he can make his own decisions, freeing Constance from the arranged marriage planned by Mrs. Hardcastle.

In the end, Marlow and Kate are united, as are Hastings and Constance. All conflicts are resolved, and harmony among the characters is restored.

Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes

To analyze the drama, the researcher selected five scenes that are considered symbolize a certain meaning. The scenes are as follows:

Data 1

MRS. HARDCASTLE : "Is there a creature in the whole country but ourselves, that does not take a trip to town now and then, to rub off the rust a little?"

HARDCASTLE : "And I love it. I love everything that's old: old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine."

Table 1. Semiotic analysis of data 1

Denotation	Connotation	Myth
The couple has different preferences regarding lifestyle. Mrs. Hardcastle favors urban life, while Mr. Hardcastle prefers the traditional countryside.	The dialogue symbolizes the opposition between modernity and tradition. The city represents progress, fashion, and prestige, whereas the countryside represents simplicity and continuity.	Urban life is perceived as more civilized and prestigious than rural life, while traditional values are associated with morality and authenticity. Social identity is constructed through lifestyle and cultural tastes.

From a social and cultural perspective, the dialogue between Mrs. Hardcastle and Mr. Hardcastle reflects the shifting values of eighteenth-century English society, which was experiencing the growing influence of urbanization, social mobility, and consumer culture. Mrs. Hardcastle represents the emerging belief that the city is a symbol of refinement, prestige, and progress, while Mr. Hardcastle embodies traditional rural values that emphasize simplicity, continuity, and moral integrity. The contrast between their viewpoints illustrates the broader tension between modernity and tradition, urban and rural life, and change and preservation. Through this domestic disagreement, Oliver Goldsmith portrays the cultural transformation taking place in his society and challenges the assumption that urban life is inherently superior to country life. By employing satire and humor, he reveals that ideas of civilization, status, and progress are not natural truths but social constructions shaped by cultural values and ideological beliefs. Consequently, the dialogue serves as a social critique of a society that tends to define identity and prestige through lifestyle and outward cultural symbols rather than through intrinsic human values.

Data 2

TONY: "The Three Pigeons expects me down every moment. There's some fun going forward."
"Good liquor, I stoutly maintain, Gives genius a better discerning."

Table 2. Semiotic analysis of data 2

Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Tony eagerly intends to go to the Three Pigeons alehouse to enjoy himself with his companions. He also expresses his belief that good liquor improves one's judgment and wit.	The alehouse symbolizes pleasure, freedom, and companionship. Tony's drinking song signifies a carefree lifestyle and resistance to seriousness and social formality. His behavior represents popular culture and youthful spontaneity.	The quotations reflect the ideology that associates leisure and drinking with lower-class culture and reinforce the stereotype of the irresponsible country gentleman.

These quotations illustrate the coexistence of two contrasting cultures in eighteenth-century England: the refined culture of the aristocracy and the popular culture of ordinary people. Tony's attachment to the alehouse and his celebration of drinking reflect the customs and recreational practices associated with rural and lower-class communities. Through humor and satire, Goldsmith presents popular culture not as inferior but as a legitimate form of social life characterized by solidarity, enjoyment, and authenticity. At the same time, the scene criticizes the rigid standards of respectability imposed by elite society and suggests that intelligence and happiness cannot be

measured solely by social rank, education, or adherence to fashionable manners. In this way, the Three Pigeons alehouse becomes a symbol of an alternative cultural identity that challenges dominant social values.

Data 3

TONY: "Go on a mile further, to the Buck's Head; the old Buck's Head on the hill, one of the best inns in the whole county."

(However, Tony is actually directing Marlow and Hastings to the Hardcastle residence rather than to an inn.)

Table 3. Semiotic analysis of data 3

Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Tony gives directions to Marlow and Hastings and tells them that the place ahead is an excellent inn. Literally, he is misleading them as part of a practical joke.	The misunderstanding symbolizes the instability of social identity and the dependence of status on perception rather than reality. The Hardcastle house becomes a symbolic space where appearances and assumptions determine how people treat one another. Tony's prank also represents youthful rebellion and the subversion of social order.	The scene challenges the myth that social status is fixed and naturally recognizable. It exposes the ideology that wealth, gentility, and authority can be easily identified through outward appearances. Goldsmith reveals that social hierarchy is a cultural construction rather than an inherent truth.

This scene reflects the class-conscious nature of eighteenth-century English society. Through satire and mistaken identity, Goldsmith criticizes a culture that places excessive importance on social rank and external signs of respectability. The episode demonstrates that identity and status are not fixed realities but products of social perception and cultural conventions. Consequently, the scene serves as a critique of the hierarchical values of the period and highlights the arbitrary nature of social distinctions.

Data 4

MARLOW: "A modest woman, dressed out in all her finery, is the most tremendous object of the whole creation."

Table 4. Semiotic analysis of data 4

Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Marlow states that a modest woman elegantly dressed is the most intimidating object he can imagine. Literally, he expresses his fear and nervousness when facing respectable women.	The quotation symbolizes Marlow's social anxiety and his inability to interact naturally with women of high social standing. The modest and finely dressed woman represents refinement, respectability, and social expectations that intimidate him. The statement also	The quotation reproduces the ideology that women of reputation and virtue occupy a special moral status and should be treated differently from women of lower social standing. It reinforces patriarchal distinctions between "respectable" and "ordinary" women and reflects

	reflects the duality in Marlow's personality, as he behaves confidently with lower-class women but becomes shy in the presence of respectable ladies.	the belief that femininity is associated with modesty, elegance, and virtue.
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The quotation illustrates the strict gender norms and class distinctions that characterized eighteenth-century English society. Women were expected to embody modesty, virtue, and elegance, while men were expected to display appropriate manners in their presence. Through humor and irony, Goldsmith criticizes these rigid social conventions and demonstrates how cultural expectations shape individual behavior. The scene suggests that gender roles and social identities are products of cultural values rather than inherent qualities, thereby exposing the artificiality of the social order governing relations between men and women.

Data 5

MISS NEVILLE: “Among women of reputation and virtue he is the modestest man alive; but his acquaintance give him a very different character among creatures of another stamp.”

Table 5. Semiotic analysis of data 5

Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Miss Neville explains that Marlow is extremely shy and respectful around women of reputation and virtue, but behaves quite differently with women of another social category.	The quotation symbolizes Marlow's double standard and the division between respectable women and women of lower status. It reveals that his behavior is conditioned by social class and moral expectations rather than by genuine personality.	The quotation reflects the patriarchal ideology that categorizes women according to their social standing and moral reputation. It reinforces the belief that "virtuous" women deserve respect, whereas women of another "stamp" may be approached with greater familiarity and freedom.

The quotation illustrates the rigid gender and class norms of eighteenth-century England. Women's identities were closely tied to reputation, virtue, and social standing, while men's behavior toward women was shaped by these classifications. Goldsmith uses Miss Neville's observation to criticize the double morality embedded in patriarchal society, where different standards of conduct applied to different categories of women. Through humor and irony, the play questions the legitimacy of these social divisions and highlights the extent to which gender roles and moral values are culturally constructed rather than inherently natural.

4. DISCUSSION

The semiotic analysis of the five selected quotations from *She Stoops to Conquer* demonstrates that Oliver Goldsmith employs dialogue not merely as a means of advancing the plot but also as a vehicle for representing and criticizing the social and cultural ideologies of eighteenth-century England. Through the interaction among the characters, the play reveals the tensions between tradition and modernity, popular and elite culture, social hierarchy, gender expectations, and moral standards. These meanings are produced through multiple layers of signification, corresponding to Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth.

The dialogue between Mrs. Hardcastle and Mr. Hardcastle concerning urban and rural life introduces the ideological conflict between modernity and tradition. Mrs. Hardcastle's desire to "rub off the rust" by visiting the city symbolizes the growing attraction of urban culture and its association with refinement and prestige, whereas Mr. Hardcastle's admiration for everything old represents an attachment to traditional values and moral simplicity. This opposition reflects the cultural transformation taking place in eighteenth-century England, where increasing urbanization and changing lifestyles challenged established social values. Through this contrast, Goldsmith questions the widespread assumption that progress and civilization are inherently associated with urban culture.

The second quotation, spoken by Tony Lumpkin, shifts attention to the realm of popular culture. His enthusiasm for the Three Pigeons alehouse and his praise of liquor symbolize a carefree lifestyle characterized by pleasure, companionship, and resistance to social formality. Although Tony appears to embody the stereotype of the irresponsible country gentleman, Goldsmith uses humor to challenge the notion that refinement and intelligence belong exclusively to the aristocracy. The alehouse emerges as an alternative social space that values authenticity and fellowship rather than the artificial manners of elite society. Consequently, the play exposes the ideological hierarchy that privileges upper-class culture over popular culture.

Similarly, Tony's deception of Marlow and Hastings by directing them to the Hardcastle residence instead of an inn becomes a powerful critique of social identity and class distinction. The misunderstanding demonstrates that status and authority are not inherent qualities but are constructed through perception and cultural expectations. Because Marlow and Hastings mistake the house for an inn, they interpret the behavior and identity of its inhabitants accordingly. Goldsmith thereby reveals the fragility and arbitrariness of social classifications and satirizes the belief that gentility and prestige can be naturally recognized.

The scene in which Marlow issues commands regarding his supper and accommodation further reinforces the critique of class hierarchy. Marlow's assumption that he has the right to regulate his meals and demand comfort reflects the privileges traditionally associated with the gentry. His language signifies authority, entitlement, and social superiority. However, the comic irony of treating Mr. Hardcastle as an innkeeper undermines the ideological foundation of aristocratic privilege. Goldsmith demonstrates that social superiority depends largely on convention and external signs rather than on intrinsic moral or intellectual qualities. Through satire, the play exposes the artificial nature of the class system and questions its legitimacy.

Finally, Miss Neville's observation regarding Marlow's contrasting behavior toward different categories of women reveals the intersection of class and gender ideology. Marlow's excessive modesty in the presence of women of "reputation and virtue" and his entirely different conduct toward women of another social category expose the existence of a double moral standard. Respectable women are idealized and placed on a moral pedestal, whereas women outside this category are approached with greater familiarity and less restraint. Such distinctions reflect the patriarchal ideology of eighteenth-century England, which evaluated women according to reputation and social standing. By presenting this contradiction humorously, Goldsmith criticizes the rigid moral codes governing relations between men and women and exposes the socially constructed nature of femininity and virtue.

Taken together, these five quotations reveal that *She Stoops to Conquer* functions not only as a comedy of manners but also as a satire of the dominant ideologies of its time. Through irony, mistaken identity, and comic reversals, Goldsmith challenges the myths surrounding urban superiority, class privilege, cultural refinement, and gender morality. From Barthes' perspective, these ideologies operate as myths because they transform historically and culturally contingent values into seemingly natural truths. By exposing their artificiality, the play invites readers and audiences to reconsider the social assumptions that govern identity, status, and interpersonal relationships. Thus, *She Stoops to*

Conquer emerges as a critique of the cultural and ideological structures that shaped eighteenth-century English society.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the semiotic analysis of the five selected quotations from *She Stoops to Conquer*, it can be concluded that Oliver Goldsmith employs dialogue as a medium to construct and simultaneously critique the dominant social and cultural ideologies of eighteenth-century English society. At the denotative level, the dialogues merely depict ordinary interactions among the characters. However, at the connotative level, they reveal deeper meanings related to the opposition between tradition and modernity, the contrast between elite and popular culture, the existence of class privilege, and the unequal relationships between men and women. At the mythic level, the dialogues reproduce prevailing ideologies concerning urban superiority, aristocratic authority, social hierarchy, and the moral categorization of women, all of which were widely accepted as natural and unquestionable truths.

Through humor, irony, and mistaken identity, Goldsmith exposes the artificiality of these social constructions and challenges the values that underpin them. The analysis demonstrates that social status, cultural refinement, gender roles, and moral standards are not inherent qualities but products of cultural codes and ideological practices. In accordance with Barthes' theory, the play reveals how myths function to naturalize historically and socially constructed values. Therefore, *She Stoops to Conquer* should be understood not merely as a comedy of manners but also as a social satire that interrogates the class system, patriarchal values, and cultural assumptions of eighteenth-century England. By dismantling these dominant myths, the play encourages readers and audiences to reconsider the nature of identity, authority, and social relations as culturally constructed rather than naturally given.

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