
UNIT 9: WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS’ *SELF-SACRIFICE AS A FARCE*

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Gather information about William Dean Howells’ contribution to American drama
- Learn the uniqueness of the farces written by William Dean Howells
- Become familiar with the characters featured in Howells’ *Self-Sacrifice*
- Learn detailed information about the plot of *Self-Sacrifice*
- Develop ideas about the reasons *Self-Sacrifice* qualifies as a farce
- Know the significance of the play’s title and sub-title

9.1 INTRODUCTION : A NOTE ON THE PLAYWRIGHT AND HIS FARCES

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was one of the most important exponents of American literature at a time when American writers collectively started developing a literature free from the influence of the British writers. Though Howells contributed to this chiefly through his fictional and non-fictional prose, his farces too were notable for their Americanness. Unlike the British farces of his time (the farces of Arthur Pinero in particular), Howells tried to write farces close to real life situations. According to Brenda Murphy, the twelve farces Howells wrote during 1880s and 1890s were “based on a close-knit circle of upper middle class friends Back Bay Boston friends” (*The Facts on File Companion to American Drama*, p.248). This play *Self-Sacrifice* shows his realistic treatment of farce as well as his use of the form of farce for critiquing social oddities. This play was first published in Howells’ book: *The Daughter of the Storage, and Other Things in Prose and Verse* in 1916.

9.2 A NOTE ON CHARACTERS

This brief play has three major characters and one minor character. Among the major characters Miss Isobel Ramsay and Mr. Walter Ashley maybe considered as the leads. Nora, the minor character does not really require much of a discussion as her role is limited to only three brief appearances. The following notes highlight these characters important features as well as their roles in the play:

Miss Ramsay: Described as a tall petite lady, Ramsay plays the role of a typical brainless beauty that romances feature. She very clearly admires flattery and yet refuses to admit it. The play shows her shallow and pretentious nature through her act of posing as a “bad woman”.

Miss Garnett: In contrast to the female lead, her best friend is a plump woman. If Ramsay plays the brainless beauty, Garnett is her hilarious confidante. Though she is not the main character, she contributes to the action very significantly. It is through her scandal mongering that the conflict of the play (discussed in more detail below) is created. Through Garnett Howells shows the busy-idle sophisticated ladies of fashionable societies.

Mr. Ashley: The hero of the play is the lawyer and Ramsay’s lover Ashley. Unlike the two women characters, he is not directly described by Howells. From the conversations between Ramsay and Garnett, it is shown that Ashley too is a typically heroic handsome gentleman. However, in order to align him with farce, Howells makes him shorter in height to Ramsay which makes them look slightly unusual by generic standards. Among the three major characters, Ashley plays the sensible person and though he too is not entirely free from the vices of fashionable societies, his actions, particularly in the last act embodies Howells’ attitude to farcical situations as well as his way of preferring reality over romances.

9.3 SELF-SACRIFICE: SCENE-WISE DETAILED SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

This section will offer a detailed summary and analysis of *Self-Sacrifice*. Though the play is a one-act one, it has multiple scenes of which the first four are basically a single incident shown incrementally. Hence, instead of analyzing these four scenes separately, this discussion will begin by talking about them together.

Scenes I-IV: The scene opens at the residence of Miss Isobel Ramsey. It features Miss Ramsey and Miss Esther Garnett, who appears to be the best friend of the former. Miss Ramsey utters the first line and this line gives the play quite a suspenseful opening. She asks Miss Garnett “And they were really understood to be engaged?”. Generally the first thing the opening of a play focuses on is the unraveling of the conflict, that is the dramatic situation the play is about to show. *Self-Sacrifice* refrains from doing it directly. Instead it builds suspense by withholding the identity of the people Miss Ramsay talks about for a while.

Soon it is revealed that Miss Ramsay was talking about Mr. Walter Ashley and Miss Emily Fray. The complexity of the situation is shown further when

the conversation between Ramsay and Garnett informs that this Mr. Ashley in question has been frequently visiting Miss Ramsay too. The situation at hand thus appears to be quite serious but Howells turns this into farce by inserting moments showing the lack of seriousness in these two women.

While Miss Ramsay had every reason to feel insulted and therefore start speaking about the whole thing very seriously, she goes on explaining how sitting down or having fresh tea helps conversations in a ridiculous manner. Even when she starts actually talking about the matter she goes on playing with words. Miss Garnett too behaves oddly by asking whether they should actually be angry with Mr. Ashley since it is yet to be found out whether Ashley was happy with his supposed engagement.

The hilarity of the situation is shown further when it is revealed that the whole conversation between these two is taking place on the basis of the word of mouth of a common friend of them named Conny. Interestingly, as Miss Garnett informs, this person Conny too had not actually told her that Mr. Ashley was engaged to Emily. Conny just speculated about it because she knew that Emily had spent a summer with Mr. Ashley. The conversation turns funnier when midway during this discussion Miss Ramsay simply forgets what they were actually talking about and then adds that they must have some good chocolates to remember what they were discussing.

As Ramsay manages to recollect the matter after consuming chocolates, she suddenly turns into a feminist of sorts by firmly telling her friend that what Mr. Ashley is doing is an insult to women in general and thus they must teach him a lesson so that he never gets the opportunity to hurt another woman. This serious spirit however goes downhill the very next moment when Miss Ramsay gets confused whether she actually feels sorry for Emily who is the other woman being cheated on by Mr. Ashley or when she asks Miss Garnett about the pronunciation of the word "primarily". Soon the two get even more confused about what actually is the justification of seeking punishment for Mr. Ashley. Miss Ramsay even starts regretting about her lack of knowledge about relationships with men. Their conversation comes at a standstill for a while because none of them can decide what actually should be done with Mr. Ashley.

Finally the two friends start discussing what books or plays tell about such situations. Miss Garnett starts enlightening her friend at this point with lots of gusto. At first she refers to a play featuring a famous actress Peg Woffington. In this play Peg is in a position similar to that of Miss Ramsay and when Peg's lover's wife approaches Peg requesting Peg to return her husband, Peg does that and the two women become close friends. Next Garnett refers to another play featuring another renowned actress Kentucky Summers. Referring to this play Garnett tries to flatter Ramsay by saying that she is as charming as this actress and just like the gentleman in the play starts falling for Kentucky after realizing that she is prettier than his beloved, Mr. Ashley must have done the same thing. Since this second play is about an engaged man rather a married man like the first play that Garnett talked about, Ramsay becomes more interested to know about this second play. When Ramsay hears that in this second play Kentucky solves the situation by appearing like a misbehaving woman one day when the

man visits which drives him away, she initially expresses her disgust about opting such a measure but as the latter part of the play shows, she actually does something similar to Kentucky. Suddenly the scene ends with Nora calling for Miss Ramsay and the next scene begins where Nora brings the news of Mr. Ashley's arrival.

After the two above mentioned scenes in quick succession, the situation turns more comical with Miss Garnett and Ramsay actually starting to jump in excitement hearing Mr. Ashley's arrival. Garnett at first exclaims at how exciting it would be if Ramsay simply starts ignoring Ashley maintaining an elegant posture that according to Garnett would suit Ramsay's tall figure perfectly but Ramsay says she would not do that and that excites Garnett further. Garnett's excitement and her wish to be a hidden witness of the interaction about to take place between Ramsay and Ashley makes her look really ridiculous. Finally Garnett leaves at the end of the third scene. In the next brief scene Howells sets the stage for further laugh riot by showing Ramsay instructing Nora to bring Ramsay's brother's cigarettes and cocktails. Nora is surprised and reminds Ramsay that she herself had said one day that these are vulgar things but Ramsay cuts her short telling that she wants these things *because* they are vulgar. The scene ends with Mr. Ashley entering the room and Ramsay welcoming him with a lit cigarette in her hand.

Scene V: Seen through the structure of Gustav Freytag's Pyramid that he used for describing the plot structure of tragedy, this fifth scene appears to be the climax of *Self-Sacrifice*. While the first four scenes build up to the rising action that is the one to one conversation between Mr. Ashley and Miss Ramsay, this fifth scene shows this rising action reaching its peak when these two characters actually meet. Quite melodramatically, the meeting begins with a moment of shock for Mr. Ashley. He had just begun to tell Miss Ramsay how eagerly waited for meeting her when he discovered her to seat in front of him smoking. When he entered Ramsay's room, he seemed quite excited and was about to tell her something but he simply freezes when he sees Ramsay in her bad woman act. Miss Ramsay goes on pretending to be an addicted person and offers Ashley cigarette and even a glass of cocktail. When she notices Ashley's bewilderment, she casually asks him if he had an issue with women smoking and drinking. At this point Howells takes a dig at the British culture by making Ramsay ask Ashley whether it is true that all British women are regular drinkers and smokers to which Ashley replies that he at least thought that American women never did these things. Though Miss Ramsay tries very sincerely to go on pretending to be a so called "bad woman", her body gives her away. When she takes a long drag from her cigarette she starts having a terrible cough and is compelled to request Mr. Ashley to open the window. The smoke makes her so sick that she has to simply throw her cigarette away and ask Ashley to pour her some tea.

Ramsay becomes too frustrated with the cigarettes and asks Ashley to simply throw them into fire but at this point the situation takes a turn when Ashley himself expresses his interest in smoking and drinking. To Ramsay's shock, Ashley even adds that he thinks Ramsay's brother has a commendable taste of liquor and cigarette. Ramsay gets her next shock when Ashley gleefully

tells her that noticing her daring nature, he would like to hear her point of view about a story that Ashley had been reading and adds that it is a story of a married man who falls in love with another woman. This shocks Ramsay beyond her limits and makes her burst out everything she had in her mind against Ashley. Ramsay then launches into a furious tirade about Ashley's cheating of her and Emily. Towards the end of this tirade, Ramsay runs out of the room in tears turning several chairs upside down and the fifth scene comes to end.

Scene VI: Just like the previous scene showed a climactic moment, the sixth scene shows a moment of revelation or what in Aristotelian terms may be called an Anagnorisis. The play indeed takes a serious turn when Ramsay leaves Ashley without giving him a single opportunity to tell his side of the story but soon the scenario gets its funny tone back with the entry of Miss Garnett. Miss Garnett comes back in her usual self for taking back her purse and she literally jumps seeing Mr. Ashley. Being an intelligent person, Ashley immediately understands the source of the rumor about him and Emily. He directly asks Garnett if she had told anything about Ashley being engaged to Ramsay. When Ashley clearly tells her that he is not engaged to Emily, Garnett becomes totally puzzled and in a slip of the tongue reveals to Ashley how exactly she had derived her conclusion and in desperation asks Ashley who Emily is engaged to. Ashley informs her that Emily is engaged to Owen Brooks and adds that Emily had spent more time with Owen last summer than she did with Ashley.

All these new developments bewilder Garnett and she almost fumblingly asks if Miss Ramsay had behaved in a strange manner to Ashley. Howells, however, sees to it that the play does not start looking too serious by making Garnett return to her ridiculous self soon. Instead of regretting about the confusion she created between Ramsay and Ashley, Garnett goes on asking the details of Ramsay's odd behavior. Garnett jumps in excitement hearing Ramsay's bad woman act and even tells Ashley that it is these moments that show how courageous women are. Finally, she tells Ashley that she considers it her responsibility to clear the mess her scandal mongering had created and tells him that he must understand that Ramsay is not at all an addicted person. Whatever Ramsay did, she did it for what according to Garnett is a noble cause. Garnett then reveals the fact of the matter to Ashley telling him that Ramsay pretended to be a bad person simply because she felt that seeing such things Ashley would leave her and return to Emily. Immediately after Garnett finishes her explanation, Ramsay returns and the scene concludes.

Scene VII: Befitting the structure of a well-made comic play, *Self-Sacrifice* now moves towards a happy ending. Mr. Ashley dominates this scene throughout. Seeing the air cleared between him and Miss Ramsay as well as realizing Ramsay's slightly frivolous nature, Ashley very slowly builds up to the final moment. Ramsay, rather coyly keeps up with Ashley's behavior by admitting that she had eavesdropped during Ashley's conversation with Garnett. Though Ramsay goes on playing difficult to get by adding that she is an eavesdropper and hence not fit for being considered a gentle person, Ashley keeps tackling the situation with complete ease. He starts moving closer to her both literally and metaphorically. He praises her bad woman

act and even goes to the extent of adding that her act was so intense that he felt like going “back” to Emily just to relieve Miss Ramsay. In order to draw her closer to him Ashley starts addressing her in endearing manner. At first he calls her Isobel, then addresses her as dearest, and finally asks the permission for calling her darling. The scene ends with Ashley about to take her in arms and saying that they are “on the home stretch”.

9.4 SELF-SACRIFICE AS A FARCE

Unlike farces by John Heywood or Arthur Pinero, Howells’s *Self-Sacrifice* is not a loud farce. The play does not feature any over the top action sequence showing one character physically hurting another, etc. Yet Howells’ play qualifies as a farce for the hilarity of the situation and ridiculousness of the characters. Whatever happens is due to a baseless rumor and yet all the characters, especially the two women take it very seriously. Its farcical nature also owes largely to its satire like qualities. Beneath the light humor of this case of classic confusion about love triangle, the play keeps taking digs at the British culture, feminists, and sophisticated people in general. In a way the whole play is about showing the farcical nature of crisis like these involving love triangles.

9.5 A NOTE ON THE TITLE

The title of any work of literature is of utmost importance as it is the first thing that the audience notices. A successfully used title helps the audience understand the subject matter and at times the treatment of it in a succinct manner. In case of this play the title reveals what the central action is going to be. When one sees Miss Ramsay and Garnett discussing possible ways of resolving the situation, the title’s significance becomes clear. However, at the end the title seems to be quite ironical too. Self-sacrifice is a very serious matter and yet for people like Miss Ramsay it is just about smoking and drinking. Hence, not just the title itself but the sub-title which calls the play a farce-tragedy seems very significant too because through this sub-title the playwright tries to reveal the hilarious difference between what Ramsay and Garnett feel about the situation and what the situation actually is. For these two persons, raised on a steady diet of larger than life romances, there is nothing more important than grandeur in life. Hence, instead of simply having a clear conversation with Ashley they prefer to deal with the situation in an utterly dramatic manner. Hence, the sub-title, just like the sub-title of Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* seems to imply that this is a trivial play for serious people and vice versa.

9.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

a) Assess William Dean Howells as a writer of Farce

Ans. You should draw references from Unit 7 and define the ways farces contributed to the growth of American drama in general. Then you should locate Howells amongst American playwrights referring to The Facts on File Companion to American Drama. Finally, conclude

the answer listing and analyzing distinct features of Howells' farce (e.g. use of realism, etc.).

b) Estimate *Self-Sacrifice* as a farce

Ans. Define farce as a form drawing upon Unit 7. Then discuss the play's plot using the detailed summary provided above. Conclude your answer highlighting the features of traditional farce and departures from the same in this play.

c) Write a note on the major characters of *Self-Sacrifice*

Ans. Outline the character sketches referring to the play's text and the discussion above. Explain how stereotypical these characters are. Conclude your assessment mentioning roles played by each of the three major characters.

d) Discuss the significance of the title and sub-title of *Self-Sacrifice*

Ans. Begin your answer explaining why titles or sub-titles are important for a literary work. Provide a brief summary of the plot and highlight the conflict therein. Explain how the title refers to this conflict. In the remaining portion of your answer, explain how the sub-title brings out the play's satirical nature.

e) Assess the Americanness of *Self-Sacrifice*

Ans. Begin your discussion explaining the cultural struggle of American writers for establishing their distinct identity post-independence of America by referring to relevant books on the history of American culture and literature. Briefly mention the role played by Howells in this drawing upon the first section of this unit. Pick any British farce of Howells' time (or you can draw upon Leslie Smith's book enlisted below) and bring out *Self-Sacrifice's* difference from it.

9.7 SUMMING UP

As stated above, after going through these discussions you should now be able to:

- Explain Howells' contribution as a writer of farce
- Analyze *Self-Sacrifice* as a farce
- Discuss the art of characterization used in *Self-Sacrifice*
- Comment on the significance of the title of *Self-Sacrifice*

9.8 SELECT READING LIST

Delphi Complete Works of William Dean Howells by William Dean Howells, Delphi Classics, 2015

The Facts on File Companion to American Drama Edited by Jackson C. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, Facts on File Inc., 2010

Modern British Farce: A Selective Study of British Farce from Pinero to the Present Day by Leslie Smith, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989



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