

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

The School for Scandal

Summary

School for Scandal is considered to be the masterpiece of Sheridan. It consists of a series of gossip and fast-paced scenes that exposes contemporary foibles through the actions of the characters. It is an attack on artificiality of human behavior and sentiments.¹

The middle-aged and wealthy bachelor, Sir Peter Teazle, has married the young and comely daughter of a country squire. The fashionable society of which Lady Teazle through her marriage becomes a part, occupies itself mainly with malicious gossip whose arrows no one, however chaste, can completely escape. By far the most dangerous of these backbiting cliques is the one led by Lady Sneerwell.

This lady is attempting through lies and letters written by the forger, Snake, to break up the love affair between Charles Surface and Sir Peter's ward, Maria, hoping to get Charles for herself. To this end she has joined forces with Charles' brother, Joseph, a hypocritical youth who enjoys an excellent reputation in contrast to his brother's wild and extravagant habits. Joseph has his eye on the fortune that will one day come to Maria and is backed in his suit by Sir Peter who has been utterly fooled by the young man's righteous exterior. Maria sees through Joseph, however, and turns a cold ear in spite of her guardian's expressed wishes.

Meanwhile, Sir Oliver Surface arrives unexpectedly from Australia. He hears such conflicting reports of his nephews and prospective heirs that he decides to look them over before he makes his arrival known. He approaches Charles in the guise of a money lender and in the famous "auction" scene buys the family portraits. Throughout the transaction he is impressed with Charles' high sense of honor and obligation to those less fortunate. When he approaches Joseph as a poor relation begging help, Joseph is revealed in his true colors.

¹ "Analysis of School for Scandal – A Well-Crafted Comedy of Manners", **English Literature**, englishliterature99.wordpress.com/2009/01/09/analysis-of-school-for-scandal%E2%80%94well-crafted-comedy-of-manners/

Now gossip has linked Lady Teazle's name with that of Charles Surface, but in reality she has been indulging for fashion's sake in an affair with Joseph. The rumors about Lady Teazle and Charles come at last to Sir Peter's ears and, much distressed; he goes to Joseph's apartment to consult with him. Lady Teazle, who is enjoying a tryst with Joseph, sees Sir Peter's arrival and hastily hides behind a screen. Sir Peter, in turn, hides in a closet, when Charles unexpectedly arrives. The latter inadvertently reveals Lady Teazle behind the screen and Sir Peter, coming out of his closet, revises his estimate of Joseph.

Lady Teazle throws herself on Sir Peter's mercy with the frank confession that she was pretending to an affair because it was the fashion, but admits that her only real interest is in her own husband. Sir Oliver, meanwhile, has rounded up Snake, the forger. His confession brings about reconciliation between Charles and Maria, and Sir Peter gladly withdraws his objections to this match.²

² "A School for Scandal", **Theatre History**, www.theatrehistory.com/british/sheridan002.html