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DISCUSS “THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL” BY R.B. SHERIDAN AS A TYPICAL COMEDY  
OF MANNERS

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper deals with Sheridan famous comedy “The School for Scandal” as a comedy of manners or a typical Restoration comedy. The comedy of manners is a phrase often used in literary history and eroticism. It is particularly applied to the Restoration dramatists in England, and especially to Congreve and Wycherley; but it is a type of comedy which can flourish in any civilized urban society, and we see it again in Sheridan (1751-1816). This kind of comedy makes fun not so much of individual human beings and their humors as of social groups and their fashionable manners. It is general satirical, though in a good-natured way. The comedy of manners is a highly artificial form of drama and is generally full of verbal wit. So, like the typical comedy of manners, ‘The School for Scandal’ is a satire on the upper-class social life of Sheridan’s time. In this essay we discussed the School for Scandal as a comedy of manners.

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751 – 1816) famous restoration play ‘The school for scandal’ was performed on May 8, 1777 and won immediate recognition. The School for Scandal is obviously a satire on the upper class society of the time. In this respect, therefore, it shares the principal characteristics of restoration comedy or the comedy of manners. There are two main targets of satire in the play: one is scandal mongering and the other is hypocrisy and self righteousness. Lady Sneerwell and her circle indulge in slanderous gossip about their friends and their acquaintances, and amuse us greatly by their combination of wit and malice’ Joseph Surface is the very embodiment of hypocrisy and self-righteousness, and she amuses us by his intrigues and his double dealing. In the end, both lady Sneeswell and Joseph are thoroughly exposed

and subjected to great humiliation and the exposure has an obvious moral.

All satires have a moral aim and the moral aim here too is unmistakable. There are a couple of other targets of satire also. The author pokes fun at money lenders by introducing to us a man called Moses, and he ridicules also the servants of prodigal young aristocrats by introducing a man called Trip in the play.

The School for Scandal is a most entertaining play the interest of which depends mainly upon its brilliant, witty dialogues and funny situations. This play is Sheridan’s masterpiece and it was his greatest contribution to the English theatre of his time. In this play Sheridan revealed the selfishness, envy, hypocrisy of the society of the time with remarkable skill and a sure knowledge of theatrical effect. He captured the current forms of fashionable speech and heightened them with fine

phrases and sustained wit. He constructed a comedy of manners that had more striking situations in it than any other in English. His characters delighted an audience and made it think. It is without dispute the most brilliant comedy written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the most successful ever produced on the stage.

**Discussion:**

The School for Scandal by Sheridan is one of the wittiest comedies in English literature, especially of the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This comedy was the revival of the restoration comedies which had a great influence in the age of Dryden. The restoration comedy is also known as the comedy of manners. This type of comedy exposes the follies, affectation, vanity, hypocrisy and the love intrigue of the people of the upper class society. The purpose of the dramatist is not only to expose them or to bring on the front but also to correct the follies by ridiculing them. It is generally satirical, through full of with language and funny situations.

The School for Scandal is one of those comedies of Sheridan on which his fame rests as the best playwright of his age and gives us an interesting picture of the upper class life of the age of Sheridan. Various aspects of that society are satirized in the play. We have a satirical treatment of gossip-mongering, hypocrisy, love intrigues, extravagance, leading to heavy indebtedness and a craze for fashion. In addition to the satire on the life of that upper class people, Sheridan also ridicules the money-lenders of the time and their greed. Eirn, the servants of the aristocratic young man are ridiculed.

Sheridan displays his mastery over wit in the very opening scene of the drama, where lady Sneerwell is discussing her scandal mongering with Mr. Snape. The scene gives us an idea of how the ladies and gentleman in those days used together and indulge in scandalous gossiping about their acquaintances and friends. It clearly reveals why the play has been given the title "The School for Scandal". Lady sneerwell, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite and Mr. Crabtree are all scandal mongers who take pleasure in circulating slanderous stories about persons of their acquaintance. Lady Sneerwell is undoubtedly the suprimo of "The School for Scandal", with her house as its

headquarters. Sir Peter Teazle who is opposed to this kind of gossiping is wonders that how these people can talk maliciously about those with whom they are so intimate. They even spread false stories about those with whom they dire twice a week. Sir Peter rightly says that every word they speak destroys the reputation of some individual. Mr. Snake, through a writer and a critic, assists lady Sneerwell in her efforts to define people by circulating wrong notions about them and by having such stories published in the gossip – columns of the newspapers.

One of the most important characters in the play is Joseph Surface who proves to be an embodiment of hypocrisy and pretentious morality. We come to know of his real character from lady Sneerwell in the opening scene. She describes him as a malicious hypocrite and a sentimental know. He is always expressing sympathy for the financial difficulties, his brother Charles is going through infect he himself is trying to do the utmost damage to the reputation of his brother. He affects the false sympathy for Sir Peter Teazle when Teazle tells him that he is unhappy because of his suspicion that his wife is having a love affair with Charles. Actually Joseph himself is the man trying to develop a love affair with Mrs. Teazle. The exposure of his hypocrisy takes place in the famous screen scene which is one of the most entertaining episodes in the play.

The School for Scandal does have its share of love intrigues which were common in the comedy of manners. Lady Sneerwell is in love with Charles Surface and she joins hands with Joseph to hinder the marriage of Maria with Charles. Joseph celebrates with lady Sneerwell in this intrigue because he himself wishes to marry with Maria, not because he is in love with her but she will bring a rich dowry. Well lady Sneerwell and Joseph have failed in their initial efforts they resort to another intrigue they make an allegation that Charles is solemnly pledge to marry lady Sneerwell. But this strategy also fails. In the mean time, Joseph tries to develop a love affair with lady Teazle also; fortunately, she is saved from degrading herself by the unexpected arrival of Sir Peter Teazle just at the right moment.

Sheridan makes fun of those young men who used to get hazily into debt for which they would have to pay heavy rates of interest. This class of young man is well represented by Charles and his companions. At the very outset of the play we here of Charles's heavy debts and the court has taken a step against him. Later we find him seeking fresh loans and making merry. He goes so far as to sell his family portraits in order to raise money. The scenes in which these aspects of Charles character are depicted provide hilarious comedy in the play. The author's satirical intension is obvious here, even though Charles does have his redeeming qualities, i.e. his benevolence and his genuine affection for his uncle Sir Olives.

The craze for fashion receives a satirical treatment by the author in the person of lady Teazle. When Sir Peter criticizes lady Teazle for being extravagant, she says, "My extravagance' I'm sure, I'm not more extravagant then a woman of fashion ought to be." Lady Teazle is of the view that woman of fashion are not answerable to anybody after they are married. There is a plerity of humor in the sins in which lady Teazle and Sir Peter are shown quarreling and lady Teazle's devotion to fashion is an important aspects of these quarrels.

Sheridan also pokes fun at contemporary journalism. In the very opening scene, we have a statistical reference to the gossip columns of a newspaper called "The Town and Country Magazine" which gladly published slanderous news items pertaining to well known personalities of the societies. On the whole, Sheridan has portrayed the manners of the time with in a small frame of this comedy skillfully and has been successful in his ideas of correcting the follies prevalent in the society by ridiculing them.

### **Conclusion**

Sheridan, in this play shows almost a classical sense of form. The play is regarded as a typical comedy of manners or as a restoration comedy. To be concluded we may say that Sheridan's comedy "The School for Scandal" contains all chief characteristics of a Restoration comedy such as a satire, love-intrigues, scandal mongering, craze for fashion and extravagance and

indebtedness etc. So, it is a typical restoration comedy or comedy of manners.

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