

Research article



# The School for Scandal as an Anti-Sentimental Comedy: A Critical Assessment

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## ABSTRACT

As a powerful genre in the eighteenth century, sentimental comedy was extremely popular in that period. A sentimental comedy arouses the emotions of sorrow, pity as well as compassion. It portrays the idea that human beings are essentially good at heart, but are astray as they are dominated by evil traits. An anti-sentimental comedy, on the other hand, is also called “Comedy of Manners”. When Sentimental comedy was on the path of decline, writers like Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Sheridan turned to anti-sentimental comedy which was basically an artificial comedy. These writers practiced this comedy to delineate the atmosphere of middle-class families. Moreover, in order to save drama from the path of decline, they were trying to restore the dramatic activities. An anti-sentimental comedy deals with the sophisticated and complex codes of conduct of the fashionable world. The central plot generally portrays the scandals, intrigues, lust and greed as the recurrent themes of the play. In this connection, William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* displays all the important features of an anti-sentimental comedy. The three plots of the comedy-love plot, Teazle plot and surface plot give an impression of a single strand of the play, the scandal plot. Love, intrigues and scandals are the crux of the main happenings of the play in which both Joseph Surface and Charles Surface, being in love with a girl, Maria. Joseph hatches an intrigue against Charles Surface to win the hand of Maria. At the end, when all the complications are resolved, both Maria and Charles Surface are rewarded with their union in love.

**Keywords:** Scandal, intrigue, decline, immortality, malicious, fashionable

## Introduction

The drama of the eighteenth century is dull and dreary affair as we can witness a gradual decline in dramatic activities in the eighteenth century. The sudden decline of drama in the eighteenth century and its continuous eclipse till the end of the eighteenth century has puzzled the literary historians. But, however, puzzling the phenomenon may seem, it is not difficult to account for it. The English drama after a continuous tradition of varying excellence for about a century and a half (1582-1720), except the closing of the theatres during the Commonwealth Period, was ousted from its place of eminence by its rival and superior attraction for the novel.

The drama, for one thing, ceased to reflect real life for another, its originality was lost and it became imitative. However, the decline of the drama, it must be emphasized, did not mean decline of dramatic activities, but deterioration in quality. There were many dramatists who were trying to uplift drama from the path of decline in which Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan are worthy of detailed consideration. Both of them are considered to be pioneers of anti-sentimental movement, who revived the genuine comedy as a counterblast to the sentimental or genteel comedy that was in vogue in the eighteenth century. It was Sheridan who excelled others dramatists, and is rightly regarded as the greatest and most popular writers of English comedy after William Shakespeare. Whereas Goldsmith's plays are an authentic reflection of the idealism, Sheridan's dramas are written in the mood of satirical observation of life which the eighteenth century novel expressed from Henry Fielding to Fanny Burney. His works are fed by sallies of the most fertile verse, a gift of style equal to that of Classical writers.

Sheridan's fame chiefly rests upon his two masterpieces-The Rival, and The School for Scandal, but it is The School for Scandal which brought him into prominence. The present play is an almost perfect example of artificial comedy in which he combines the comedy of manners with the sentimental admixture which is partially successful. In this play, Sheridan makes use of none of the license which the Restoration dramatists had allowed themselves, and he was successful in that without departing from the spirit of his own time. The play is a superb dramatization of art by Sheridan comprising of superb wit, brilliant dialogues, and excellent command on comic situations and above all, Sheridan's skillful handling of plot and stock characters is remarkable.

The School for Scandal exposes heartless and malicious scandal mongering, the moralizing sentiments that is no less than the hypocrisy, current standards of marital conduct, and irresponsible geniality. One of the charges leveled against Sheridan as a dramatist is artificiality of plot-construction, and The School for Scandal is no exception in this direction. All the three plots-the Love Plot, Teazle Plot, and Surface Plot give an impression of uniformity as all their separate strands are held together. In all the three plots, scandal plays its harmful role, and as a result of that, Maria stops meeting Charles Surface. She only meets him in the final scene of the last act; Mr. Teazle, a credulous husband, starts suspecting his wife having an illicit relationship with Charles Surface; Mrs. Teazle becomes the object of Joseph's malicious attentions. In brief, the scandal mongers namely Lady Sneerwell, the president of the school for scandal; Mrs. Candour, Benjamin Backbite and Mr. Crabtree are so harmful that they do not spare even their friends and relatives. The scandal mongers dominate the first two acts so much so that the love complications can be labeled as scandal plot. As a result, Love Plot does not develop.

## **Discussion**

As far as the love complications are concerned, Charles loves Maria sincerely, and Lady Sneerwell intrigues to trap Charles Surface. To win the hand of Maria for wealth, Joseph Surface hatches an intrigue against his brother, Charles. Even Joseph and Lady Sneerwell appear to be in love with each other and all this takes place in Act IV, Scene, III of the play. It is here that the malice of Lady Sneerwell is fully exposed by Mr. Snake which paves the way for the union of Charles Surface and Maria by telling them that he has forged love-letter from Charles to Lady Sneerwell. So far Teazle Plot is concerned; the dispute between the fashionable Lady Teazle and her old dangling husband has become a thing of daily routine. No doubt, she is not answerable to her husband, and due to the suspicion that she has an illicit relationship with Joseph Surface, even then he loves her genuinely without any artificial touch. It is Joseph, who wants to make her wife an object of his seduction, but Petre Teazle says that he intends to give an independent life to his wife, and she will inherit a major portion of his wealth after his death. But, thanks to the Screen Scene, A miniature drama in itself whose setting has been provided by Joseph Surface's library where the villainy and hypocrisy of Joseph has been exposed. After that, the volatile and gay Lady Teazle, makes up her mind to lead the conjugal life.

Whereas in Surface Plot, the uncle of both the brothers who returns from India after a gap of fifteen years, is not affected by the scandal mongers. At the advice of Rawley, an honest ex-steward to the Surface family, he tests the characters of his nephews, Charles and Joseph in the disguise of Mr. Premium and Mr. Stanley respectively. Interlinked with the three separate plots, the main strand is of scandal theme which conveys the idea that never believes what is said and don't be credulous like Mr. Teazle, be on your guard against scandals.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, in *The School for Scandal*, Sheridan has attained both the balance of action and the technical perfection of the scenes. Sheridan has been called as the dramatic star of first magnitude, and among the comic writers of the eighteenth century, he shines like Hesqueras among the lesser lights. Sheridan's comedies resemble the best of Restoration comedies without the immorality of the Restoration play. Like William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, and William Wycherley's *The*

Country Wife, in Sheridan's comedies, we witness a polite world of fashion, but he makes its vices appear foolish by exaggerating in the humorous portraiture of the drama.

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