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Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The School for Scandal

by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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The School for Scandal

Note to the Teacher

Richard Sheridan's play *The School for Scandal* has been called by critics one of the most popular comedies in the English language. While the modern student who has watched situation comedies on television all of his or her life may be ready to challenge the critics' assessment, consider this fact. Since the play was first performed in London in 1777, it has reappeared on stage every few years somewhere in the English speaking world.

When Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans came to power in England, they closed all the theaters because they viewed theater-going as sinful. In 1660, when Charles II was restored to the throne, however, the theaters reopened with a vengeance. The new Restoration drama became noted for its comedies called "comedy of manners." The "comedy of manners" was usually satirical and dealt with the conventions and manners of a sophisticated society. The witty and polished dialogue often satirized aberrant social behavior, and the plot usually involved illicit lovers. The characters in these plays were not meant to be individuals; rather they were types, and this fact could often be seen in the names that the playwright gave them.

Since the plays were both about and for the gentry, the characters in the "comedy of manners" were gentry. As the rising middle class began to replace the gentry as theatre audiences however, they rejected these "amoral, rich characters" and demanded to see plays that reflected their moral values. As a result, the "comedy of manners" was gradually replaced on stage by "the sentimental comedy."

Critics of that time complained that the sentimental comedies, which blatantly appealed to the emotions, were long on tears and short on laughs; nevertheless they were very popular with the audiences. In these sentimental comedies men of sentiment mouthed noble and fine sounding phrases in an attempt to teach moral lessons. The villains, who always received their just deserts, were either severely punished, or seeing the error of their ways, they promised to reform by the play's end.

Although virtue might be severely tested, virtue in sentimental comedies always triumphed. In order that the audience did not miss the point, the heroes and heroines in these plays were given to speaking lofty moral sentiments, such as, "all that glitters is not golden." When literature, such as this type, makes an obvious effort to teach morality, it is labeled didactic.

By the last act, the sentimental comedies always presented repentant sinners and triumphant people of virtue. At times, the virtuous person might make a tremendous sacrifice, but whenever he or she did, he or she was always materially rewarded. These endings, of course, are not very realistic. In real life virtue is seldom rewarded with material gains, and greed or vice is not always punished.

The School for Scandal

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define irony and satire and point out instances of these in this play.
2. describe the social and historical context of the play and show how the play is both a “comedy of manners” and a satire on the “sentimental comedy.”
3. describe each character in terms of traits, attitude, values, motives.
4. summarize plot development.
5. discuss the idea that comedy is a more useful tool than sentimentality to make people see their own mistakes.
6. discuss what constitutes honorable behavior as exhibited in this play.

The School for Scandal

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the farcical humor in this play. Where does it occur, and what gives rise to it?
2. Dr. Johnson defines satire as a literary form “in which wickedness or folly is censured.” Relate this definition of satire to this play by identifying what the targets of satire are.
3. If you were casting this play for a Hollywood production, state whom you would put in the following roles and give the reason for your choices.

Sir Peter
Lady Sneerwell
Joseph Surface
Charles Surface
Maria

4. In what ways were the “sentimental comedies” a reaction to the Restoration “comedy of manners” that came before them?
5. In what ways were the new comedies, such as Sheridan’s, a reaction to the “sentimental comedies.”
6. What elements of the sentimental comedies do we see in this play?
7. Which characters in this play might be considered honorable?
8. Identify, define, and give examples from the play of three types of irony.

4. Assuming that Lady Sneerwell and Joseph Surface have a romantic attachment, Snake asks Lady Sneerwell why she is intent on breaking up the relationship between Joseph's brother, Charles, and Maria. What is her response?

5. How does Joseph Surface appear to most people who meet him? Beneath this surface, what does Lady Sneerwell recognize in Joseph?

6. Sir Peter, Maria's guardian, has what opinion of Joseph?

7. While Joseph appears to be a moral, responsible, mature young man, how is his brother Charles perceived?

8. Of the two brothers, which does Maria love? Why have they broken up?

4. What is it that Sir Peter wants to keep Sir Oliver from knowing? Why?

ACT II, Scene I

VOCABULARY

fête champêtre – outdoor entertainment

jangle – noisy talk or arguing

coiners – creators; inventors

expostulation – discussion, examination

1. How would you describe the exchanges between Sir Peter and his wife in this scene?

2. In what way are the two characters in the scene stereotypes?

ACT III, Scene 3

VOCABULARY

- raillery** – good natured joking
- mantle** – to cover or go over
- abjurer** – one who rejects or renounces
- bumper** – a large cup or glass
- demurred** – delay, hesitate
- prodigious** – enormous

1. We have heard a great deal about Charles, but this is the first time we see him. Does he seem to be as extravagant and wasteful as we were told?

2. While Sir Oliver initially likes Charles' straightforward manner, why does Sir Oliver become upset with Charles?
