

**BEN JOHNSON WROTE THAT “COMEDY WILL SHOW AN IMAGE OF THE TIMES AND SPORT WITH HUMAN FOLLIES NOT WITH CRIMES” HOW FAR DO YOU AGREE THAT THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL REPRESENTS THE FOLLIES OF BOTH SHERIDAN’S TIMES AND OUR OWN?**

‘The School For Scandal’ is a comedy of manners, first performed in the 1770’s. The playwright, Richard Brinsley Sheridan comments on many themes and issues throughout the play, reflecting on matters such as class, wealth and authority between genders. However, his motive in portrayal of such topics can be difficult to determine, as the question often arises as to whether Sheridan is portraying the quips and idiocies of society or whether he is trying to reflect a more serious and critical flaw of society.

One key theme of society reflected in ‘A School For Scandal’ is of gossiping between women. This concept epitomises the core of the play, and questions why people, women in particular, require gossip in their daily lives. A clear example of this is in Act 1 Scene 1 when Mrs Candour converses with Maria. “The town talks of nothing else.” This quote suggests the entirety of the population is involved in the spreading of gossip, thus presenting the subject of gossip as exceedingly prevalent in Sheridan’s society. Through out the play women join together with only intentions to gossip, however, it is stressed to be void of malicious intent, as seen in this quote from Act 2 Scene 2. “I vow I have no malice against the people I abuse.” Lady Teazle protests. This suggests that the theme of gossiping between women does not show a crime of the era but is in fact a jovial folly, and is therefore in agreement with Johnson’s criticisms. However, this ongoing commentary of women can be analysed using a feminist critique. Sheridan’s portrayal of women as superficial and petty for gossiping may be interpreted as reflecting obstacles within his society and not follies. Sheridan raises key questions through this as to whether women are left so tedious with their roles in life that they must resort to petty gossiping to fill time and quench boredom. This question echoes the issue that women of high status (like those seen in A School For Scandal) are not obligated to work and are expected to remain at home content with the positions they hold. Therefore, perhaps through his portrayal of women, Sheridan is actually revealing a serious side to what, at first review, may seem a trivial comic folly, commenting on the shallowness of women who have nothing to strive for and are provided for by the dominant man. Many of these issues are still relevant in today’s society. Although women have made many advances in society since Sheridan’s era, women still enjoy gossiping and may act superficial, despite being expected to strive and utilise more independence. This may suggest that women in fact gossip out of petty enjoyment to know more about one another. Examples of this in the modern era include television shows such as Loose Women and magazines such as Closer and Heat, which rely on gossip in order to function. This popularity in both Sheridan’s era and the modern day may suggest women gossiping is an inherent part of their behaviour and is a harmless, enjoyable folly.

Another key theme of society echoed throughout ‘A School For Scandal’ is the portrayal and motives of marriage. An ongoing subplot of the play follows Lady and Sir Peter Teazle’s turbulent relationship and addresses many crucial issues that marriage poses. An example of this is in Act 2 Scene 1 where Sir Peter and Lady Teazle begin to argue about their relationship. “If you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me not married me. I am sure you were old enough.” This quote confronts two key issues of marriage in Sheridan’s era, the oppression of women under a dominant husband and the role of age and its prevalence in marriage. Despite, these two topics seeming deservedly serious, Sheridan presents their marriage as comic with Sir Peter and Lady Teazle being used frequently as a comic device to create a satirical tone through the constant repartee between the couple. By presenting this turbulence as comic Sheridan may be trying to encourage the audience to laugh at their own marriages and the ludicrous ways couples can

behave. Through *Lady and Sir Peter Teazle*, Sheridan also provides a comic commentary on financial situations involved in marriage. When discussing Lady Teazle's situation before her marriage, Lady Teazle explains, "No t'was a very disagreeable one or I shouldn't have married you." This suggests that Lady Teazle only entered into matrimony to gain financial benefits and social ranking. This is a reflection of Sheridan's era where it was expected to use a marriage as a device to gain wealth and reputation. However, once again Sheridan appears to present this in a comic way, with wit and rejoinder, maybe once again encouraging the audience make fun of the traditional marital opinion of his time, perhaps suggesting the problems found in marriage are insignificant and over-exaggerated. Yet, this could also be interpreted as addressing a crime of society. Oppression of women and dictatorship in choosing a partner were very serious issues in Sheridan's times as after the Puritan regime, women felt a new sense of freedom and hope for equality. With a feminist critique it can be viewed that the issues Sheridan addresses are actually earnest issues that affected many in his society. Although, in today's era, women are viewed as of equal authority to men in marriage and matrimony is expected to be for love and not personal gain, there are still occasions where Sheridan's commentary is relevant. For example, celebrities often marry for publicity and increased fame, and will file for divorce with huge media coverage shortly afterwards. This suggests that while marriage has evolved and become more natural process, marrying for personal gain is unfortunately, still a relevant topic in today's society.

Another key theme reflected throughout *'The School For Scandal'* is the interaction and presentation of different classes in society. The play constantly narrates the ongoing relationship between people of different classes and roles in society. An example of this is in Act 3 Scene 2 when servant Trip is discussing with banker Moses, the loan that he has recently acquired. "One wouldn't like to have one's name made public." This suggests that lower classes are also concerned with their reputation and the consequences gossip could have on their lives. This concept is further explored in Act 5 Scene Three, where upon revealing he has betrayed Lady Sneerwell proclaims to Sir Peter Teazle "I live by the badness of my character." This quote also echoes the notion that all classes are impacted by the spreading of gossip and are also active in such spreading the rumours. Sheridan's reflection of society being saturated by the omnipresent threat of gossip may be trivial and Sheridan may be commenting how futile such activity is by lacing it with humour and comedy to expose to the audience silliness and folly of partaking in gossip. However, by analyzing this concept through a Marxist critique, the motivations for Sheridan exposing the extent to which gossip has spread through classes in society may be his way of satirically mirroring the way the upper classes have poisoned those of a lower class. Many lower class people will be influenced by those of a higher class, especially when they are exposed to them in close proximity through work. Therefore, perhaps Sheridan is actually portraying a crime of society that needs addressing: That lower classes should not be reliant on those of a higher class to gain morals and to mold their behavior. This was a pressing issue in Sheridan's time when there was segregation between those of a high or low class, with many people of a lower class wanting to improve their situation by achieving wealth, reputation and a higher class. However, in today's society those of an upper class are usually viewed with contempt and are often the victims in stand up sketches and panel shows, showing a change in attitude towards them, but still an appreciated relevance in the subject. However, comedy is also drawn out through Sheridan's presentation of higher classes. For example, in Act 2 Scene 2 Mrs Candour remarks, "Well, I never will join in ridiculing a friend." This comment, which is clearly untrue as the entirety of the plot in *'The School For Scandal'* revolves around Mrs Candour and other characters gossiping and making judgements about those closest to them, uses irony to create humour. Dramatic irony is used as a key comedic device by Sheridan to present the higher classes in the play to the audience with a satirical tone that encourages the audience to find comedy in their insincere and two-faced

comments. This presentation may be Sheridan echoing society and commenting on the way upper classes act in a frivolous and futile nature. By encouraging the audience to find comedy in this Sheridan may be presenting this topic as a petty folly of the time; a discrepancy that should be laughed at rather than scorned. However, Sheridan may be extending the irony of the dialogue to the way in which he has presented the play and its themes. Sheridan may be trying to raise awareness to the larger and increasingly serious issue of the superiority and prejudice the upper classes exude when interacting with other members of society. Therefore, by encouraging the audience to laugh (in most cases at themselves) Sheridan uses satire to portray a social message and to expose a crime of society. This theme is still extremely relevant in today's society where the upper classes are often mocked for their self-imposed superiority as the divide between classes widens; this is highlighted by shows such as 'Mock the Week' and 'Made in Chelsea' where the upper classes are often ridiculed or presented in a insincere fashion.

In conclusion, I do agree that 'The School For Scandal' presents the follies of Sheridan's era and the present day, as seen through the constant use of comedy to depict the flaws of society. However, I feel in some aspects, Sheridan's commentary goes beyond recognizing the follies of society and actually exposes some serious and relevant problems in society which are still detectable in society today. Sheridan's use of satire in this format allows for varied interpretations on Sheridan's true feelings towards the issues he presents in this play. Yet, I feel the use of satire as a comedic device helps to demonstrate Sheridan's commentary on the crimes of society by using comedy as a method to portray this.

**1,659 words (without quotes included)**

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