
“VICE PERSONIFIED OR THE PINNACLE OF COMIC DELIGHT?” HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THIS COMMENT WITH REGARD TO THE SURFACE BROTHERS IN THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL?

Comic delight does not merely mean the enjoyment the audience feel when watching a play such as *The School For Scandal*. It encompasses many aspects, including a character's contribution to the progression of the plot, role in the ending of the play and impact upon other characters. Here, 'vice' will be taken to mean wicked or immoral character or weakness in behaviour and can be defined in terms of both original and modern contexts.

The younger Surface brother, Charles, is typical of the rake in Restoration comedies, taking pleasure from extravagant activities such as drinking and gambling. This is shown most prominently in Act 3.3 with the line "many of our acquaintance have taste, spirit and politeness but, plague on't, they won't drink" showing his elevation of frivolous and immoral activity (which could be perceived as vices) over good qualities. Likewise, the line "let me throw on a bottle of champagne and I never lose," combines the two and demonstrates Charles' carefree attitude to life regardless of whether it is right or wrong. Not recognising one's own vices could be seen as a vice within itself, yet Charles is "exceedingly frank" about them, describing himself as "an extravagant young fellow who wants money to borrow." At the time, the upper social classes would have recognised Charles' qualities as their own. This introduces an element of satire and hints at the comic delight Charles might bring to the play as well as his impact on the audience through the ability he gives them to hypocritically laugh at themselves. However, it may be scorned at by the lower classes who would laugh at the others above them in society for their frivolity. Modern audiences may admire him for being honest and not deceitful regarding his vices, which in themselves are no longer so seriously regarded. This line introduces Charles' other possible vice: borrowing money. It is ironic that Charles is a member of the rich upper class but is not rich himself and is forced to rely on others, and that he spends what little he has frivolously rather than constructively. This aspect may lead to comic delight as the audience feel superior in wealth and security to Charles, and thus laugh at his misfortune.

Aside from this, Charles creates comedy by provoking satire and causing the resolution of Act 4.3 by pulling down the screen. He also provides examples of high comedy, a device Sheridan used famously, using such remarks as "I thought it a shame to keep so much knowledge to myself" when talking about the sale of his books. This defensive line veiled as humour creates comedic delight both through its entertainment on behalf of the audience and its ability to transition a serious thought into a light-hearted one. Comic delight is also induced through Charles' influence on the plot; his storyline involving Sir Oliver features heavy dramatic irony as Charles does not recognise him (despite owning a portrait of Sir Oliver that is an "inveterate likeness.") This again gives a feeling

of superiority to the audience who possess more knowledge than the characters and thus gain enjoyment from the ignorance of the other characters in relation to them.

Joseph Surface displays vices throughout the play different to Charles'. One action that could be seen as immoral is his flirtation with Lady Teazle throughout the play, as this at the time could be damaging to her. During the Restoration, whilst women were more liberated than they had been in the past, it was still the male reputation that was stronger. Thus if their actions became public, Lady Teazle would be more affected – this is why she is “in tears” in Act 5.3. So by initiating the relationship – “I wanted at first only to ingratiate myself with Lady Teazle” – he is threatening her reputation and her security within the society for his own gains.

Despite the new style of thinking which encouraged a more liberal stance on the role of individuals in a marriage, many people were still influenced by the rigid Puritan stance on marital loyalty. Therefore this action could be perceived as a vice as Joseph is interrupting the relationship between the Teazles. Following on from this, Joseph can be seen as ‘stealing’ Lady Teazle away from Sir Peter as women were still marginally inferior to men and considered their possessions. This may have been seen as a vice at the time, however modern audiences may be less receptive to this due to changing gender equality.

Joseph shows awareness of these possible vices in Act 4.3, saying “though I hold a man of intrigue to be a despicable character, it doesn't follow that one should be an absolute Joseph either.” This can be taken to reflect the era, showing the conflict between religion (“absolute Joseph” meaning biblical good character) and new values. This phrase is also ironic; Joseph Surface cannot be the Joseph he sets himself up to be with his false reputation. The deceit of projecting one character whilst maintaining a lie could also be seen as a vice. The line “[aside] indeed I do not [to Lady Teazle] O, I certainly do” exemplifies this idea and perfectly embodies his surname “Surface.” However, these actions could also be seen as comic delight. His two faced nature provides dramatic irony for the audience, who know what he is really like, and creates comedy as they are intellectually superior to the characters onstage. Through Lady Teazle, Joseph has a large impact on the plot and character development of the play, and is therefore comically important.

One of the main comic scenes of the play is Act 4.3, renowned for its farcical nature and audience entertainment. It is important to note that Joseph is the character that inadvertently orchestrates this scene and thus has a significant impact as a force of comic delight. The exchange as Sir Peter enters the closet, with both he and Lady Teazle peering out, features Joseph visually represented as the middle of the chaos he has created. This would present him as “the pinnacle of comic delight” to the audience, who would be entertained by the farcical physical set up and dramatic irony of the moment. It is also symbolic of Joseph's role as the centre of scandal in the play and therefore also illustrates his comedic importance with regards to plot manipulation and impact until this point. Through this scene, the Teazles will be reunited and the denouement of the play instigated.

This denouement can be seen to tie together the ideas of Joseph being immoral and Joseph as a comedic delight. The resolution of the affairs of Act 4.3, shown by the stage direction "Joseph Surface enters just as Charles Surface throws down the screen" provides comedy as the dramatic irony known to the audience all along falls away. This action can simultaneously be seen to validate

the vices of Joseph's character. Sheridan foreshadows in Act 4.3 that men whose affairs are revealed may be "branded as the pest of society", meaning that they will lose all credibility and become the gossip of the school for scandal. This fate could be seen as that which Joseph receives at the end of the play as he walks off the stage alone having been exposed. Thus, Sheridan may be confirming that Joseph has comedic worth as an antagonist as well as exposing his vices for portraying him as such.

In conclusion, both this and the ability of the audience to find comedy in the brothers because of their their flaws shows the Surface brothers reflect both 'vice personified' and the 'pinnacle of comic delight.' This perfectly embodies Sheridan's message of *The School For Scandal*: scandalous behaviour is difficult to frown upon when it is being taken with delight by both historical and modern audiences.

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