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COMEDY OF MANNERS

It is a spirited ridicule of the affectation and the pretentiousness of the upper class society. It is a cerebral form of dramatic comedy that depicts and often satirizes the manners and affectation of a contemporary society. The plot is usually woven around an illicit love affair or similarly scandalous matter. Subordinate to the play's brittle atmosphere one finds witty dialogues and a pungent commentary of human foibles.

Comedy of Manners is also known as High comedy because it involves the use of sophisticated wit and talent in the writing of the script .In this sense, it is completely the opposite of slapstick which requires little skill with the script and is largely a physical form of comedy.Often the play contains minimal physical action and involves a heavy use of dialogue. It often employs an equal amount of both satire and farce. It is a hilarious portrayal of social groups

Most of the plays of this genre were carefully constructed to satirize the very people watching them -usually the middle and upper class society who were wealthy enough to afford going to the theatre.The play's central focus is on the materialistic nature of the upper class society and the never ending desire to gossip and the hypocritical existence of individuals.

Comedy of manners is also known as Restoration comedy .The English theatres were officially closed between 1642 to 1660 during Oliver Cromwell's Puritan rule in England .In 1660 with the Restoration of Charles II to the throne, one of his first actions was to grant several key theatrical figures licences to produce plays .Usually the end of Restoration period is marked with the death of Charles II in 1685 but it is extended by historians to about 1700.

The major contributors in this genre were William Wycherley and William Congreve. During this period in France, Moliere was also writing comedy of manners .Three of his most famous works include *The School for Wives* (1662), *Tartuffe* (1664), *The Misanthrope* (1666) where Moliere satirised certain aspects of the 17th century French society.

Around a hundred years later the Irish playwright Richard Sheridan and an Englishman Oliver Goldsmith revived the Comedy of Manners .The best example of their work include *The School for Scandal* (1777) and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773).

Again a little over a century from the date, comedy of manners was revived in England by the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde with plays like *Lady Windmere's Fan* (1892)and *The Importance of being Earnest* (1895).

THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL: RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

- ❖ Comedy in five acts
- ❖ Performed in 1777 and published in 1780

The School for Scandal –Structural Analysis (Introduction, Rising action, Climax, Falling action, Resolution)

Introduction

1. Lady Sneerwell plots mischief in her school for scandal.

Rising Action

2. Sir Oliver is rumored to be returning from the East Indies.
3. Sir Peter, just married, quarrels habitually with his wife.
4. Sir Oliver decides to test the character of his nephews.
5. Charles Surface is depicted as an immoral young man.
6. Disguised as a moneylender, Sir Oliver interviews Charles.
7. Charles auctions all but the painting of Sir Oliver.
8. Charles gives the money to Mr. Stanley, a poor relative.
9. Charles finds Lady Teazle hiding in Joseph's library.
10. A scandal ensues, and rumors are spread.

Climax

11. Joseph Surface is unmasked as a hypocritical fraud.

Falling Action

12. Sir Oliver reveals his stratagems to his nephews.

13. Snake reveals the truth about his and Lady Sneerwell's schemes.

14. Lady Sneerwell is utterly discredited.

Resolution

15 Charles and Maria are happily united and will marry.

Summary of the play-

Act 1

Lady Sneerwell confers with her assistant Mr. Snake. He reassures her he has copied and then submitted all the scandalous articles, or "paragraphs," to be published in the latest periodicals. Sneerwell's group of gossipmongers, or those who spread gossip, soon gathers. The group includes Joseph Surface, Mrs. Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and Crabtree. Exchanging nasty news about prominent socialites is their only occupation. They are particularly severe on Joseph's spendthrift brother, Charles Surface, with whom the aging Lady Sneerwell is secretly in love. Maria, who is the object of Charles's romantic attention (as well as Joseph's), sweeps out of the room, repelled by the group's malice.

At Sir Peter Teazle's house, Sir Peter laments the end of bachelorhood. His new wife, a young woman from the country, is extravagant and stubborn, refusing to acknowledge his authority. Rowley acted formerly as a steward for Sir Peter's family. He informs Sir Peter that Sir Oliver Surface has just returned from a long sojourn in the East Indies.

Act 2

At Sir Peter's house, the Teazles quarrel about Lady Teazle's extravagant taste for costly luxuries. She tells her husband expenses are inevitable if a lady is to remain in fashion. She reminds him he has promised to accompany her on a visit to Lady Sneerwell.

At Lady Sneerwell's the group of gossips discuss women's excessive and inappropriate use of cosmetics. Lady Teazle joins in enthusiastically, while Sir Peter comments on the conversation. Joseph tries to press his courtship of Maria, but he is found in a compromising position by Lady Teazle.

Sir Oliver Surface arrives at Sir Peter's house and teases his old friend about the latter's recent marriage. When the talk turns to the character and reputation of Sir Oliver's two nephews, Joseph and Charles, Sir Oliver declares he intends to test both young men to find out their true nature.

Act 3

Sir Peter and Sir Oliver continue to discuss how the latter's nephews should be tested. With the help of Moses, a moneylender, they decide that Sir Oliver will impersonate a financier named Mr. Premium. He will agree to provide the extravagant Charles with funds at an exorbitant rate of interest. Lady Teazle enters. She and Sir Peter exchange pointed quips in another quarrel.

The disguised Sir Oliver makes his way with Moses to Charles Surface's house, where they are told by a cheeky servant named Trip that they must wait. Eventually Charles agrees to receive them. Charles, who is devoted to wine, women, and gambling, is surrounded by friends, including Careless, Sir Harry Bumper, and two gentlemen. After a preliminary conversation, Charles agrees to sell portraits of his ancestors and relations to "Premium" to raise the money he needs.

Act 4

In the picture room, Charles places his family portraits on auction, with Careless playing the role of auctioneer. Charles refuses to sell only one picture: the portrait of Sir Oliver. Touched, Sir Oliver remarks in an aside that he forgives Charles for all his dissipation. Once the money has been handed over, Charles generously dispatches Rowley to give 100 pounds to a needy relative named Stanley.

Joseph Surface prepares for a secret, romantic meeting with Lady Teazle at the library of his house. When she appears, she complains of Sir Peter's suspicions of her. Joseph replies that if she will give him grounds for suspicion, he will deserve his own distress. Before the two can finish their talk, however, the servant announces the arrival of Sir Peter himself. Improvising quickly, Lady Teazle hides behind a screen. In a conversation, Sir Peter confides to Joseph that he harbors suspicions about his wife's behavior with Joseph's brother Charles. Joseph is the soul of rectitude, but he panics when Charles is announced as a visitor and Sir Peter wants to hide behind the screen. He glimpses a petticoat, but Joseph makes up an excuse, saying that a "little French milliner" has come to visit, and Sir Peter hides in a closet instead.

The scene's confusion is compounded when Lady Sneerwell's arrival is announced. This is too much for Joseph, who races off to deal with the latest crisis. Charles throws down the screen to reveal Lady Teazle. Joseph re-enters and lamely excuses himself, but Lady Teazle disavows his explanations and Sir Peter denounces him as a villain.

Act 5

It remains for Sir Oliver, this time disguised as the poor relation Stanley, to test Joseph's true character. In an amusing scene, Joseph is shown to be a dissembler, or a person pretending to be something he is not, as well as a hypocrite. He refuses to be charitable to Stanley and speaks maliciously of his uncle Oliver as well.

Lady Sneerwell's gossip circle energetically debate what actually happened in Joseph's library. Some claim it was Charles who behaved improperly, and some blame Joseph. Some of the gossips assert that a duel was fought, but they disagree over the weapons—swords or pistols. Sir Peter himself soon appears, unwounded but indignant. He demands that the gossipmongers leave his house. On Rowley's recommendation, he agrees to a reconciliation with Lady Teazle.

In the play's final scene, set at Joseph Surface's library, Lady Sneerwell and Joseph glumly discuss their secret plans regarding Sir Peter, Charles, and Maria. In an amusing jumble of mistaken identities, Charles and Joseph wrongly identify their own uncle as Premium and as Stanley. Charles apologizes to Sir Oliver for his disrespectful treatment of the family portraits. Snake is unmasked as a liar and a forger. Charles becomes engaged to Maria, and the play ends on a happy note.

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