

## The School for Scandal

### Study Guide

#### Summary:

In a part of English high society where gossip runs rampant, a tangle of love has formed. Lady Sneerwell is in love with a young, rebellious man named Charles Surface. However, Charles is in love with Maria, as is his brother Joseph. Maria is in love with Charles, but Lady Sneerwell and Joseph plot to ruin this relationship through rumors of unfaithfulness on Charles' part. At the same time, an older man named Sir Peter Teazle has taken a young wife from the country, now called Lady Teazle; after only a few months of marriage they now bicker constantly about money, driving Lady Teazle to contemplate an affair with Joseph Surface.

The plot thickens when Sir Oliver Surface, the rich uncle of Joseph and Charles, returns to town from abroad. He schemes to test the rumors he has heard of Joseph being the well-bred and deserving brother and Charles having fallen into ruin; to do so, he goes to each of them in disguise. He disguises himself as a money lender named Mr. Premium to investigate Charles's spending habits, and is infuriated when he sees Charles living lavishly while driving the family far into debt. Charles proposes to sell him all he has left, the collection of family portraits, angering his uncle even more; however he forgives him when Charles refuses to sell the painting of his uncle.

The tangle of love and rumors becomes clear when, while Lady Teazle is visiting Joseph Surface, her husband comes to call. Lady Teazle hides behind a screen and listens to their conversation. Then, Charles Surface comes to call on his brother as well; Sir Teazle, hoping to see whether Charles is having an affair with his wife as has been rumored, also tries to hide behind the screen. He sees what he thinks is simply a young woman Joseph has been trying to hide. Sir Teazle hides in the closet instead, but when Charles starts to talk about Joseph's relationship with Lady Teazle, Joseph reveals that Sir Teazle is hiding in the closet, and Charles pulls him out. When Joseph goes out of the room momentarily, Sir Teazle tells Charles about the young woman he thinks is hiding behind the screen, and they pull it down to reveal his wife.

Sir Oliver visits Joseph dressed as one of their poor relations looking for money. Sir Oliver is disappointed to find that Joseph is only kind on the surface, but will not do anything material to help his relative.

The play ends with Sir Oliver revealing his plot and his findings to Charles and Joseph. Everyone realizes that Lady Sneerwell and her servant Snake orchestrated the rumor about Charles and Lady Teazle.

#### The School for Scandal Character List:

##### Joseph Surface

Joseph is Charles' brother, cunning and ambitious. He wants to marry Maria because of her money, and he plots with Lady Sneerwell to make this happen. He is promiscuous and propositions Lady Teazle to have an affair. He loves money and he refuses to help his poor relative, Stanley (really Sir Oliver in disguise), telling him that he has no money, even though this is not true.

##### Charles Surface

Charles is one of Sir Oliver's nephews, madly in love with Maria. He is a young man who likes to spend money; he has a kind heart and is open about his flaws. He is grateful for the help his uncle provides and refuses to sell his portrait out of respect even when Mr. Premium (really Sir Oliver in disguise) offers to pay a fortune for it. Because of this, Charles is considered to be the worthy nephew.

##### Sir Oliver Surface

Sir Oliver is Charles and Joseph's rich uncle, who has been in the East Indies for a long time. He sent his nephews money while he was away; once he returns, he wants to find out more about their true character in order to determine who is worthy to get his inheritance. To do this, he assumes the identities of Mr. Premium and Stanley to test them. He is kind and vigilant, not believing everything he hears about Charles and Joseph.

##### Sir Peter (Pete) Teazle

Sir Pete is an old gentleman, very rich, who marries a young girl. He takes Joseph's side and tells Sir Oliver about Charles' behavior. He wants to separate from his wife because he thinks that she spends too much money; in the separation, he is willing to let her a large sum of money.

as a form of compensation. Ultimately, however, he decides against breaking up with his wife, and tries to reconcile with her.

### Lady Teazle

She is Sir Pete's young wife, described as very beautiful but vain, with a passion for having fashionable clothes. She and her husband have their little arguments and Lady Teazle thinks about having an affair with Joseph; however, she decides against it when she hears her husband talking about the money he intends to leave her.

### Maria

Maria is a young girl, one of the only characters who doesn't like to gossip. She can be viewed as a symbol for what is pure and good. She loves Charles, but Joseph tries to break them up; he almost succeeds when rumors are spread about an affair between Lady Sneerwell and Charles.

### Lady Sneerwell

Lady Sneerwell is a widow, a wealthy woman who likes Charles and who is willing to do anything to break up Charles and Maria. She finds an ally in Joseph, and together they start to scheme. She is known for her tendency to spread rumors; because of this, she is very popular in her social circle.

### Mrs. Candour

She is one of Lady Sneerwell's friends who also likes to spread rumors. She is a hypocrite because she affirms that spreading rumors is bad, even though she does this too.

### Snake

She is Lady Sneerwell's servant who helps her by spreading her rumors.

### Moses

He is one of Charles' money lenders, who helps Sir Oliver get in touch with his nephew.

## The School for Scandal Important Quotes and Analysis:

"Tale-bearers are as bad as the tale-makers."

Mrs. Candour, p.28

In this quote, Mrs. Candour raises one of the central questions of the play. Are those who spread rumors and scandal, as she says, as bad as those who create them purposefully to harm the reputations of others? While Sheridan seems to believe so, that Mrs. Candour suggests this is ironic and hypocritical since she is one of the major spreaders of gossip in the play.

"To pity, without the power to relieve, is still more painful than to ask and be denied."

Joseph, p.192

Throughout the play, the audience has been led through the conversations of many characters to believe that Joseph is the more moral and worthy of the two Surface brothers. However, in Act V Scene I, Joseph refuses to give any money to Sir Oliver, who has disguised himself as Joseph's poor relative, Mr. Stanley. In this quote, Joseph even tries to spin the situation as if it is more difficult for him, who supposedly feels deep pity for Mr. Stanley but simply does not have money to give, a fact which Sir Oliver knows is not true.

"Wounded myself in the early part of my life by the envenomed tongue of slander I confess I have since known no pleasure equal to the reducing others to the level of my own injured reputation"

Lady Sneerwell, p.15

In Act I Scene I, Lady Sneerwell directly tells Snake and the audience about why she is willing and eager to spread rumors she knows could ruin others' reputations. This kind of honesty, especially so early in the play, is surprising because of how guarded and deceitful the play's characters generally are in the public sphere. This quote and the surrounding scene set up one of the major conflicts of the play: the rumor that Charles and Lady Teazle are having an affair, which causes both Sir Peter and Maria to doubt their lovers.

"If you wanted authority over me you should have adopted me and not married me"

Lady Teazle, p.47

This quote is representative of the ongoing arguments that plague Lady Teazle and Sir Peter's marriage, but it also alludes to the theme of gender and the role of females in the play. See the discussion in the "Themes" section for more on the theme of gender and this quote's relation to it.

"There is no trusting to appearances"

Lady Sneerwell, p.199

In this quote, the word "appearances" alludes to a number of different themes and events in the play. First, physical appearance itself is of high importance since looking youthful and fashionable was important to maintaining one's social status. In this and other scenes in the play, small groups of people gossip ruthlessly about people's appearances, and especially their use of makeup, which is criticized if it is too heavy or improperly done, since this reveals one's failures to appear beautiful, youthful, and in fashion. Second, this quote reminds the audience of the theme of disguises in the play. This is seen both literally through Sir Oliver's visits to his nephews in two different disguises, and figuratively in the social act of disguising one's flaws, as Joseph does by pretending to be moral and caring but actually being selfish and greedy.

"A School for Scandal! tell me, I beseech you,

Needs there a school this modish art to teach you?

No need of lessons now, the knowing think;

We might as well be taught to eat and drink."

Prologue narrator, p.11

This quote begins the prologue to the play, given after the "portrait" (p.5) but before the play truly begins with Act I Scene I. In this prologue, themes of gossip and gender, among others, are foreshadowed and discussed ironically. Specifically, this quote asks the audience whether anyone actually needs to be taught how to spread scandals in society at that time, since it seemed to come as naturally to people as eating and drinking.

"If they were to consider the sporting with reputation of as much importance as poaching on manors, and pass an act for the preservation of fame, I believe many would thank them for the bill."

Sir Peter, p.67-8

The political nature of the play's morals becomes clear in Sir Peter's discussion of a bill for the preservation of fame. Though Sheridan's play is humorous and entertaining, at its heart it is a satire, which means Sheridan sought social awareness and change. Specifically, he sought to shed light on the devastating effects of gossip and scandal on individuals and society at large, and suggested through the character of Sir Peter that there should be harsher laws to punish rumor-spreaders and to protect those whose reputations might be threatened.

"There's no possibility of being witty without a little ill-nature: the malice of a good thing is the barb that makes it stick."

Lady Sneerwell, p.24

Another major question the play raises is whether smart, funny people could have an entertaining conversation without judging and gossiping rudely about others. While Sir Peter and Maria suggest that this could and should be the case, many other characters seem to believe that being mean is simply part of normal conversation, especially if the conversation is meant to be humorous. They do not care about the negative effects of their speech on those present or on those whom they discuss.

"I'll not debate how far scandal may be allowable; but in a man, I am sure, it is always contemptible. We have pride, envy, rivalry, and a thousand motives to depreciate each other; but the male slanderer must have the cowardice of a woman before he can traduce one."

Maria, p.24

Maria's character is a symbol of moral purity in the play. Even when she is in a large group of people all gossiping about someone, she refuses to engage with them and often speaks up against what is happening. In this quote, she shames the other characters for their rumor-spreading and underscores the interplay of the themes of gossip and gender. She seems to suggest that women are more prone to gossip, though Sheridan also, perhaps pointedly, shows that many of the characters who create and help to spread rumors in the play are male.

"I have got a room full of ancestors above: and if you have a taste for old paintings, egad, you shall have 'em a bargain!"

Charles, p.124

The portraits of Charles's ancestors are a symbol of his apparent disregard for family in pursuit of money. This is a major event in the play since Sir Oliver needs to decide which of his nephews are worthy of inheriting his fortune and many characters have argued throughout the first three acts of the play about whether Charles is actually devoid of morals. Sir Oliver promises himself that he will never forgive Charles after the young man agrees to sell his family's portraits, thereby symbolically giving up the family's proud lineage, especially for "a bargain"(p.124), but he soon forgives his nephew when he refuses to sell the portrait of Sir Oliver for any price.

The School for Scandal Themes:

### Gossip

Gossip is perhaps the most central theme of *The School for Scandal*. Gossip, or rumors, may be true or may be false; in general, however, gossip is spread by both unofficial channels (word-of-mouth) and official channels (newspapers). Since word-of-mouth spreads faster, gossip is mostly spread in the play through that channel, but it is clear from discussions between characters that the spreading of rumors through newspapers has a particular way of spreading information far and making it seem credible. The main rumor spread in the play is that Charles and Lady Teazle are having an affair (spread purposefully by Lady Sneerwell, Joseph, and Snake), but other rumors arise and circulate as well, such as Charles's debt, Joseph and Lady Teazle's affair, and Sir Peter being wounded in a duel.

### Marriage

Marriage is another key theme of the play. This theme is mostly explored through the troubled marriage of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle. Sir Peter and Lady Teazle are different ages, come from different backgrounds, and seem to have different opinions about how people in the upper class should act; Lady Teazle believes she needs to keep herself integrated by spending money to stay in fashion and taking part in gossiping and judging. Sir Peter, on the other hand, would rather they live more simply and morally, and seems to not have expected this behavior from his wife. This says something about the way their relationship progressed and the way that

husbands and wives generally behaved with one another in Sheridan's time. Though the couple attempts to be friendly at times, the pressure Lady Teazle feels from society, especially as an outsider, damages their marriage. Interestingly, Sheridan also does not seem to believe that an affair necessarily means the end of a relationship: while the constant arguing in the first half of the play does force the couple to contemplate separation and perhaps drives Lady Teazle to pursue the affair, Sir Peter finding out about this actually gives him hope and confidence that his relationship with his wife may strengthen from her remorse.

## Gender

Gender is an important theme in *The School for Scandal*, especially as it interacts with other themes of the play such as gossip, marriage, and family. Women in upper-class, 18th-century England were generally viewed as less than men, and were treated as objects. In this play, they play two main roles: daughters and love interests. Lady Teazle even comments directly on these two options open for women, and the different power structures in the two: she tells Sir Peter, "if you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me, and not married me"(p.47). In fact, Sir Peter is shown to have little authority over either his wife or his adopted daughter (or ward) Maria, who continues to lust after Charles and refuse the love of Joseph, despite her substitute father's wishes. Gender is also important to the theme of gossip because much of the gossip, especially the more trivial gossip, is focused on women. For example, in one long conversation, a group of gossipers discuss the makeup use of a few women who are not shown directly in the play. In another case, the men at Charles's house sing a song about different kinds of women, remarking on particular aspects of their physical appearances and characters.

## Family

Morality in *The School for Scandal* seems to be most judged by the way you treat your family. This theme is shown through the comparison between Charles and Joseph Surface, brothers who both seek inheritance from their rich uncle Sir Oliver Surface. Sir Oliver goes to each in disguise. He goes to Charles disguised as Mr. Premium, a money lender, and is appalled when Charles agrees to sell the collection of their family's portraits. This act represents him disregarding and disrespecting his family and lineage. However, he refuses to sell the portrait of Sir Oliver, and Sir Oliver completely forgives him. Sir Oliver goes to Joseph, who is generally regarded as the more moral and proper brother, dressed as Mr. Stanley, a destitute family member. Joseph is shown to lie and not help Mr. Stanley, even though Sir Oliver knows he has the money to do so. However, Charles, who is deeply in debt and thought to be a selfish young man, does send 100 pounds to Mr. Stanley. Weighing all of this, Sir Oliver decides that Charles will be his heir. This shows that, other moral failings aside, Sir Oliver sees the loyalty and



willingness to support one's family as the most worthy trait in a man. It can be surmised that Sheridan wanted to promote this value, especially in cases where it might conflict with perceived social propriety.

## Politics

Satires, like *The School for Scandal*, are inherently political. While farces simply parody aspects of society through exaggeration, humor, and irony, satires do all this while pushing a particular message about an aspect of society that the author thinks needs to change or receive more attention and understanding. In this play, the theme of politics intertwines with the more general theme of gossip or scandal. It seems that there were not laws in place at the time to protect individuals from false rumors, or slander, which Sheridan shows has the power to ruin people's reputations and cause unrest in society as a whole. Sheridan challenges this through the character of Sir Peter, especially in dialogue with Lady Sneerwell. Lady Teazle challenges him, "Would you restrain the freedom of speech?" (p.53), and a scene later he has a prepared retort when the subject arises again, responding "if [parliament] were to consider the sporting with reputation of as much importance as poaching on manors, and pass an act for the preservation of fame, I believe many would thank them for the bill...in all cases of slander currency, whenever the drawer of the lie was not to be found, the injured parties should have a right to come on any of the indorsers" (p.67-8). Sir Peter believes punishment should be wrought both on the original creators of the rumor and those who spread them, making illegal much of what causes the conflicts of the play.

## Physical Appearance

Physical appearance was clearly of great importance in the upper class in 18th-century England. This is of particular importance in this play since it is a comedy of manners, meaning that it focuses on upper-class social customs, and since drama itself as a medium focuses on physical appearance more than genres that are purely textual. Physical appearance in *The School for Scandal* intersects with the theme of gender in that the physical appearances of women are more remarked upon due to their lower status in society. For example, there is a long, gossip-filled conversation between men and women alike about the makeup habits of some women who are not seen onstage in the play (one woman in particular is criticized for using makeup on her face but not blending it with her neck, creating an effect like an old statue whose head has been mended back onto its body (p.59)). In another scene, a group of men at Charles's house sing a song about different kinds of women, focusing particularly on their different physical characteristics such as having light or dark skin and having or lacking dimples (p.110).

## Money

Since *The School for Scandal*, as a comedy of manners, focuses on the lives and flaws of upper-class people, it is fitting that money or wealth is a strong theme in the play. A major question in the play is whether characters and the audience should believe Charles or Joseph to be the more moral and/or worthy brother. Joseph is shown to be wise and proper but stingy with his money, while Charles is fun-loving and spends himself into debt but is willing to give money to a poor relative, valuing family over his own wealth. Money is also the main issue that plagues Sir Peter and Lady Teazle's marriage, since she likes to (and feels the need to) spend more lavishly than he approves of. She seems to do this to try to stay in fashion, and thus in good standing, with high society. Sheridan thus shows how money played an important role in social standing, often to the point of causing interpersonal difficulties.