

Human nature in sherdian and burke



**ASSIGN
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The play *The School for Scandal* by Sheridan and Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* explore human nature, and the complexities that emerge from social interactions, or perhaps more internally, through our own disposition.

Sheridan's satire took on the scandalmongering of the trendy London society of 1770 with stock characters, such as the flirt, the gossip, the wastrel, the bore, and the rich uncle, among others. In *The School for Scandal*, personified names, witty dialogue, and schemes all intertwine, creating a successful play. The thesis of this essay aims to compare both the play, more specifically the final act, and Burke's *Enquiry*, and explore their similarities and their respective ways of portraying human emotion and human nature in their own ways.

Crucially, Burke raises an important explanation as to why humans act in the way that they do, due to his *Philosophical Enquiry* focusing on sympathy, and its effect on tragedy and imitation. He states that 'the objects which in the reality would shock, are in tragically...the source of a very high species of pleasure' essentially claiming that any pain inflicted on a person will always trigger sympathy from a person, almost without realisation. Clearly, this idea is reflective of a society in London whose very existence, at least in Sheridan's plays, depends on scandal and the demise of others. From the two antagonists, Lady Sneerwell and Joseph Surface, who seek to destroy the relationship between the frivolous, and indulgent Charles Surface, to the double-deceiving servant Snake, all of whom live for scheming and sabotage - all prove Burke's theory, insinuating that humans, essentially, thrive of others' misfortunes. Additionally, Burke raises the significance of 'Imitation,' in which there is a consensus of 'belonging' which may not necessarily may

be a product of societal influence, but much rather, something which is engraved into our human nature.

Thus, a direct comparison can be made with Sheridan's play through his characterisation, more overtly in the character of Mrs Candour, who can create the theme of hypocrisy, despite her little to no stage presence, due to her supposed disapproval of gossip despite being ruthless in her spreading of gossip. She directly demonstrates Burke's theory of imitation, as she spreads rumours mainly because of the fact it was effectively in fashion, and perhaps a little for her own enjoyment - which again, Burke discusses in his inquiry. Sheridan's intentional use of satirical comedy and hypocrisy allowed him to correct social absurdities - perhaps acting as a social commentator, much like Henrik Ibsen in his play *A Doll's House* gender inequalities in a physical and emotional sense, or even Arthur Miller's in the play *All My Sons* begging the question, what is more important, family or your role for society? Indeed, these plays take more serious approach to their respective issues, which is exactly what Sheridan avoids doing, which might have more success in the eyes of Burke. The discussion of the 'sublime' defined as 'the contemplation of a landscape or of a dramatic tragedy is often painful and threatening.' Perhaps Burke would have argued that if Sheridan avoided his satirical style then he might have had a deeper and more intellectual effect on his audience, meaning his would have achieved his theatrical aim more successfully. However, as Sheridan's play and Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* have differing forms, catechising the question, is there still a valid comparison between the two? While their forms may differ, there still can be

a strong synergy between the two texts, as Burke's analysis provides central theories on human sentiment, all of which is fundamental to Sheridan's play.

With regards to reception, evidently both works together received positive and negative criticism, challenging their authority of their texts, and ultimately their ability to accurately reflect a reality with success. With a focus on the final scene of Sheridan's play, where the Peripeteia is made clear to the audience, we can unravel all the lies and sabotage through unintentional admission of guilt (or in the case of Lady Sneerwell, understand a character left with no other choice). Critics such as James Thompson, argue that 'It is, moreover, a poorly, or at least a very loosely, constructed play, with two separate plots clumsily grafted together' which is veritable, as Moore fills 'The Life of Sheridan'' with extracts of notes and drafts from two distinct plays - one containing the machinery of the scandalous college, to have possibly being called 'The Slanderers', and the other setting before us 'The Teasles and the Surfaces' This lack cohesiveness, and difficulty in finding a tangible plot contrasts entirely to Burke's writings. Of course, his works have had massive appraisal and add an immense magnitude on the literary works; even his writing style and fluidity is prized 'wrote marvellously, with incredible freshness of imagery and inexhaustible passion—a passion informed by principle' It could be inferred that Burke understood society as The University of Bookman explains: 'Burke understood that the modern world had lost its center, that it was in an intellectual and spiritual mess. He scented the rise of totalitarian ideological thinking in the French Revolution and its aftermath' Burke's full comprehension of the world he lived in allows him to explore, define and explain certain emotions, and the reasoning

behind them. Therefore, Burke can reflect a reality with authority, and with concrete evidence, whereas Sheridan is simply reflecting the society that he lived in a romanticized, witty and with a playful attitude.

Nevertheless, in order to criticise both works with regards to reality, it is important to understand the difficulty in defining 'reality' as a concept - Young argues that 'Literature is thus consumed by the ideological preoccupations of the critic's perceptions of current reality' meaning that reality is a personal mode of thinking, it's defined by a variety of influences varying from person to person - This means that Burke's Philosophical Enquiry is only reflective of a reality that he believes, and the same approach must be taken for any critical analysis of both Burke's and Sheridan's works. This is a vital factor in comparing the two works: but, both raise important issues in their own ways. From the overall voice of Burke's inquiry, it takes an informative tone while simultaneously consistently asking the reader to consider their own actions in certain situations, using interrogative statements such as 'But suppose a fatal accident happened... who would have never been content to see London in all its glory?' which a more direct way of encouraging reflection, rather than the wit shown in Sheridan's play in the last scene 'And may you live as happily together as Lady Teazle and I intend to do!' with its satirical tone.'

A major comparison can be made from both *The School for Scandal* and *A Philosophical Enquiry* with regards to gender and the 'Sublime'. Burke begins to discuss this in 'that this passion may either partake of the nature of those which regard, self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the, sublime or it may turn upon ideas of pleasure' Which has

strong connotations of a being male, and a patriarchal force as critics suggest. A similar exploration of male attributes, in the character of Snake in Sheridan's play. Is Snake representative of male evil as deceives twice, both his victims and his accomplice? Or does he represent the man of the time, or even Joseph Surface's interior motives - perhaps highlighting the moral corruption that exists. Although, Snake begs for forgiveness ' I live by the badness of my character; and, if it were once known that I had been betrayed into an honest action, I should lose every friend I have in the world.' Linking to Burke touching upon the desires to feel included, and a part of a group. Even those that commit wrong doings create a group, the desire to imitate others actions despite full acknowledgement of their actions. Sheridan is able to successfully show the audience that such actions exist, and one does not need to hide behind their true self. The remaining actors all fulfil Snake's wishes of keeping his good actions secret, to show the audience that they shouldn't accept that, almost mocking their ignorance of Snake. The characters are able to sympathise with Snake, showing that they all fear social exclusion and ostracising - a trait defined, and explored by Burke. Furthermore, links can be made with the Peripeteia of the play and tragedy as explained by Burke ' it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any imminent hazard before I can take delight in the sufferings of others'. This statement summarizes the entire catalyst of the play, in that the characters ensure that they are not in harm's way before they gossip about each other, they mock anything until it concerns themselves. Therefore, a strong argument could be made, suggesting that Sheridan was fully aware of the selfish attitude among the 18th century

society, simply by satirising what happens every day in a scandal ridden London.

Evidently, both *The School For Scandal* and *A Philosophical Inquiry* share distinct similarities in their explorations of human sentiment, and the reasoning behind them. Burke takes a more informative approach, encouraging a reflective attitude about an ignorance of others feelings after distress, that society incites this. However, Sheridan dramatized message through wit, humour and scandal ensures that his audience are aware of the scandal and absurdities that exists around them, perhaps more directly promoting self-reflection, more so than Burke. From an academic perspective, one would favour Burke's *Enquiry*, but for a more expansive comprehension of human sentiment, and to target society as a social commentator, the writer who excels in this regard is Sheridan.