

# Periodic Research

## William Congreve's *The Way of the World*: A Microcosm of Restoration Society

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### Abstract

The return of Charles II to England from France marks the beginning of the Restoration age. His arrival restored the Monarchy in England. The people gathered to welcome him with open arms because they were relieved from the stifling pressure of a Puritan Government. The restoration age, depending on the context, stretches from 1660 to the end of the reigns of William and Mary (1689-1702) and may also be extended up to the reign of Queen Anne. One of the first decisions that Charles II took in 1660 was to re-open the theatres after being closed by the Puritans in 1642. With the restoration of Monarchy and re-opening of theatres, the people felt liberated from the Puritan values of life and moved towards the life of luxury and amusement. The life of luxury changed their taste, and they preferred to enjoy comic and satiric plays. The lifting of the ban resulted in an explosion of dramatic writings. The playwrights depicted the fashionable life of men and women in their works. But the Puritan values of life also survived side by side, and the people of this opinion continued to disapprove of theatre and opposed it as a source of immoral amusement. These two opposite viewpoints found expression in the plays of Restoration period. The playwrights started writing about men and their manners as the Restoration was the age of reason and intellect rather than an age of wonder and excitement. The subject matter for discussion was man's existence on this earth or his immediate environment- in simple words, the social milieu in which he lived. That is why, unlike the sixteenth-century writers, the seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers turned their gaze from heaven to the earth, from glorification of God to the assessment of man. In *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, Alexander Pope states, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, The proper study of Mankind is Man" (1-2). William Congreve knew before Pope that the ways of God are too high for our comprehension and that is why he tried to assess men and his immediate environment. The rational analysis of empirical facts found its voice in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. He mirrors the manners, behaviour, habits, modes and morals of the ladies and gentlemen of the upper-class society and thus makes his play a microcosm of the Restoration society.

**Keywords:** Restoration, Puritan, Immoral, Society, Morality, Values, Assessment, Comic, Empirical.

### Introduction

The Restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660 restored monarchy and, thus, replaced Cromwell's Commonwealth and its puritan ethos. In the field of thought, a shift could be seen from the probing, exploring, risk-taking intellectual values of the Renaissance to reason and facts. The theatre of the Restoration was also significantly different from Shakespeare's theatre. Puritans closed them in 1642 but Charles II re-opened the theatres within three months of his return and issued a patent to Thomas Killigrew and Sir William D'Avenant to establish two companies of players. The most significant development was that women could now perform women's part on the stage. With the restoration of Monarchy and re-opening of theatres, the people felt liberated from the Puritan values of life and moved towards the life of luxury and amusement. The playwrights moved in to present the authentic picture of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century society. A new form of drama emerged which is labelled as 'the comedy of manners' because it "mirrored directly the manners,

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Modes and morals of the upper-class society which was its main audience" (Ronald, 2008:129). The plays of the Restoration age depict excess of freedom as the city dwellers threw off Puritan constraints. Several plays were written and performed from about 1660 to 1700 although a few of them are performed today. The period saw the emergence of some playwrights who achieved lasting fame for writing wonderful plays. George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) are some of the notable plays of this period. When we read the plays of this period, our first impression is that we have left ordinary people behind us and entered the closed and attractive world of fashionable men and women. The characters are obsessed with fashion, gossips, intrigues and their self-created circle in society. The setting is always London and fashionable ladies and handsome gents spend their time in witty conversation. Both the young and the old ladies try to be attractive to entice young men. The men spend their time in chocolate houses and in playing cards. Men are always ready to have affairs and women married or unmarried are ready to accept their proposal. In these comedies, strong contrasts are made between innocence and knowingness, rustic country manners and the refinement of the city.

## Objective of the Study

The study seeks to prove that *The Way of the World* is a Restoration Comedy with a serious purpose. The dramatist shows the faults of his characters to advise the audience that the environmental and social framework cannot be disregarded because we disapprove of the individual who cannot or will not fit into it. The paper also aims to indicate that the play's subject matter is related to man's material existence or his immediate environment, i.e. the social milieu in which he lives. The social pattern is given greater significance in the play, and Congreve hopes to teach the individuals how to adjust to their environment.

## Review of Literature

1. Ronald Carter and John McRae say, "What raises Congreve above many of his contemporaries is the acute observation of the social and emotional pressures on characters who are more richly drawn than traditional stereotypes. Like many later writers of comedy, Congreve was something of an outsider, having been brought up in Ireland, and perhaps the outsider's eye gave him a privileged viewpoint on the society he portrayed with such insight, sympathy, and wit" (2008:133).
2. Richard Gill mentions that Congreve writes about "Characters who are rich and leisured, but who do not lead momentous lives like kings and queens" (1995:227).
3. Rickett argues that "In construction and grasp of character, Congreve steadily improved with each succeeding play. But from the very first he exhibited himself as a master of light and witty dialogue. Therein lay his great strength. He has

the easy gaiety of Etherege and the satirical force of Wycherley, and speedily he showed how well he could excel these dramatists on their own lines" (2006:224).

4. According to John Peck and Martin Coyle, "Restoration comedy, which comes under the broader heading of comedy of manners, deals with the sexual relations and intrigues of men and women belonging to polite society" (2002:101).
5. In introduction to William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, David Roberts argues that "the lasting appeal of *The Way of the World*, one of the most performed and discussed of all plays written in the Restoration period, lies in Congreve's sophisticated grasp of the plot, back-story, characterization and language" (2020:1).

## An Overview of *The Way of the World*

*The Way of the World* has a well-knit and conventional structure with five acts that perfectly handles its highly complex plot. The Act I introduces all the male characters and gives us information about other characters of the play and the events that have already taken place. In the opening scene, we meet Mirabell and his friend, Fainall who have just finished playing cards. Mirabell is unhappy and then Fainall remarks: "Confess, Millamant and you quarrell'd last night" (l.i.19-20). This conversation reveals Mirabell's love for Millamant. Fainall encourages him to marry her but we hear of the practical obstacle to their marriage. Lady Wishfort, Millamant's aunt, controls half of her fortune and her prior permission is necessary if the money is to be claimed. This constitutes the main problem of the play. Mirabell has already made an effort to win the favour of Lady Wishfort by showing his false love but didn't get success. The story begins against this background. The structure of the plot is based upon one central action that is Marabell's second trick.

Act II takes us to St. James Park. Mrs. Fainall and her friend are seen talking about their hatred for men. Fainall arrives and accuses Marwood of being in love with Mirabell. Fainall is having an affair with Mrs. Marwood and his wife Mrs. Fainall (Lady Wishfort's daughter), is the secret lover of Mirabell. In this act, Mirabell conspires with Waitwell and Foible to trick Lady Wishfort into giving her blessing to the wedding. According to the plan, Waitwell will pose as a fictitious uncle of Mirabell to win the hand of Lady Wishfort. It is also decided that Mirabell will step in to expose the imposture and in gratitude Lady Wishfort will agree to his marriage with Millamant.

With Act III, the scene shifts to the house of Lady Wishfort. She is a lonely lady and Foible persuades her to marry Sir Rowland, fictitious uncle of Mirabeell, to get rid of loneliness. Actually, Sir Rowland is Waitwell in disguise. Mrs. Fainall and Foible discuss the plan to trick lady Wishfort into marriage. Mrs. Marwood happens to be there and overhears them and decides to tell the plan to Fainall. At the end of Act III, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood meet to discuss the details of their plan of counter-attack.

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In Act IV, Lady Wishfort tells Millamant that she wants her to marry her nephew Sir Willful Witwoud. The bargaining scene between Mirabell and Millamant is also found in this act. Both are mature and strong-willed and discuss the terms of their marriage. Towards the end of this act, Waitwell as Sir Rowland enacts his grotesque courtship of Lady Wishfort. However, Mrs. Marwood's anonymous letter to Lady Wishfort discloses Sir Rowland's imposture. Then Waitwell and Foible think of an explanation and the audience expects that the catastrophe would be averted. The Curtain falls and Act IV ends on this note of suspense.

Act five begins with Lady Wishfort turning Foible out of the house as the plot is discovered. Then Fainall appears and tries to blackmail Lady Wishfort into transferring her money to him by using his knowledge of Mrs. Fainall's affair. Lady Wishfort quickly understands the situation and, to save her fortune and honour, agrees to give consent to the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant if Mirabell averts the disaster. Mirabell saves the situation and produces a contract in which Mrs. Fainall had transferred her property to Mirabell. Thus, Mr. Fainall's plan to blackmail Lady Wishfort falls to pieces. Finally, Mirabell receives the blessings of Lady Wishfort and is ready to marry Millamant with all her fortune.

## Textual Analysis

William Congreve is regarded as the most influential writer of the comedy of manners. He wrote five plays: *Love for Love*, *Double Dealer*, *The Old Bachelor* and *The Way of the World*, all comedies and a tragedy *The Mourning Bride*. These plays deal with almost similar themes of intrigues, secrets, marriages and inheritances. In *The Way of the World*, Congreve lays bare the hypocrisy of the fashionable ladies and gentlemen of the times to which it belongs. He gives a kaleidoscopic view of the habits, behaviour, morals and affections of the people of contemporary society. The play opens in a chocolate house, a place of male sociability reserved for wit, gossip and cards. Here the audience gets an idea that the gentlemen of the Restoration period were busy with useless and unproductive things. Having just finished the game of cards, Mirabell and Fainall open the play with the following dialogue:

*Mirabell: You are a fortunate man, Mr. Fainall*

*Fainall: Have we done?*

*Mirabell: I'll play on to entertain you (I.i.3-5).*

The audience gets to know another aspect of the Restoration society that is, gambling. Their dialogue proves that they play for entertainment's sake. Mirabell's reply to Fainall's opening question shows that he will play on simply to please his friend. It indicates that the whole play will be something of a game in which Mirabell and Fainall will be the chief participants. It is interesting to note that Fainall wins the game in the opening scene but the fight which begins at the very outset results in the defeat of Fainall in the closing scene of the play. In the end, the plans of Fainall are foiled by Mirabell and the whole play is reduced to a game of tricks. Actually, the opening scene enables William Congreve to give

an authentic picture of the eighteenth-century society.

The Restoration was a period of loose morals and *The Way of the World* gives an adequate idea of the prevailing morality. Illicit love and adulterous relations are conveyed to the audience through Fainall, Mrs. Fainall, and Marwood and even through the hero of the play Mirabell. Contrary to our conventional idea of a hero, Mirabell had sexual relations with Lady Wishfort's daughter and when she disclosed her pregnancy to him, he married her off to Fainall. This relationship is a glaring example of the mockery of love and it seems that both Mirabell and his mistress treated love affairs merely as a sport. There is another instance of a false relationship- the love affair of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Marwood was in love with Mirabell but he did not entertain her. She, thus, is a frustrated woman who would like to avenge herself on Mirabell. She establishes a friendship with Fainall but he suspects that she is still in love with Mirabell, and he openly tells her his suspicion. This allegation annoys Marwood and she threatens to expose his affair with her. Fainall seeks reconciliation with Marwood and promises to make amends. He declares to her:

"I'll hate my wife yet more, damn

her! I'll part

with her, rob her of all she's worth,  
and will

Retire somewhere, anywhere to  
another world. I'll

Marry thee- be pacified"(II.i.252-  
55).

This episode is hilarious and Congreve obviously ridicules this type of relationship in the play. This love affair is based on money as far as Marwood is concerned and on lust combined with money so far as Fainall is concerned.

Marriage and relations between men and women is another social aspect that has been discussed and depicted in the play. Karl Marks observes that the natural and necessary relationship of one human being to another is that of man and woman. The depth of this relationship is the best criteria to judge how far man has developed. If we accept this view, we will not take it as a simple comedy of the Restoration age but as a play with serious purpose, having as its theme the relations of men and women both inside and outside marriage. In *The Way of the World*, we see that the marriage of Fainall and Lady Wishfort's daughter is not sacred. Lady Wishfort's daughter agrees to marry him just to cover up her illicit relationship with Mirabell and her pregnancy. Fainall agrees to marry her just for the sake of money and lust. He calls his marriage as "Scurry Wedlock." Fainall's motives are purely mercenary. The characters seem to have three major preoccupations in life- money, marriage and sex. Men are always in search of ladies to develop love affair and women are equally ready to give them indulgence.

Let us now discuss the love affair between Mirabell and Millamant that is central to the play *The Way of the World*. They love each other truly

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because Millamant knows that her lover had a relationship with Mrs. Fainall but she does not mind a lover with such a past. Mirabell tells Fainall that he likes Millamant "with all her faults; nay like her for her faults"(I.i.64-65). Millamant also tells Mrs. Fainall:

"Well, if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I am a lost thing- for I find I love him violently"(IV.i.322-24).

They love each other well but also know that love alone cannot sustain married life. So, there is a proviso or bargaining scene in the play. Here, Millamant fights for her individuality, her rights and the rights of every woman. Actually, in this scene, they face each other not as Romantic lovers but as rational human beings who know that the firm foundations of marriage can be built on rational thinking. Millamant declares that she would be 'solicited' till the very moment of marriage. Her demand for her own 'space' was a new and modern idea at that time, as it was articulated before Virginia Woolf explained the concept of "a room of one's own." She puts a condition that she would like to get up when she pleases to give free reigns to her morning thoughts. She would not like to be addressed by such names as "Wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweetheart and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar"(IV.i.201-3). She wants Mirabell to maintain certain distance and thus bargains for her liberty, for her right to privacy. Then there are the conditions of Mirabell. His counter conditions do not disturb Millamant and what he demands of her is entirely acceptable to her. He demands that his wife will not have a confidante or a she-friend to screen her affairs or a fop to take her to theatre secretly. He denounces the use of tight dresses during pregnancy and also wants her not to use masks made of oiled skins. The conditions are stated by both the parties to arrive at some kind of mutual understanding. After mutual consent, the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant would really be a marriage of true minds. The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Fainall represents false manners and the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant will undoubtedly represent the true manners. By presenting these two approaches towards marriage, perhaps, Congreve wants us to know what is right and what is wrong.

In *The Way of the World*, Congreve further exposes the intrigues, greed, legacy conflicts, vanities, affections and fashions of women. M. H. Abrams says, "It (Restoration Comedy) deals with relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society"(2009:51). Legacy conflicts were common during the period of Congreve and mercenary motives governed matrimonial alliances of the time. This kind of thinking naturally lead to intrigues both in the social and domestic spheres of life. As already stated, Fainall marries the daughter of Wishfort for money and lust. Mirabell also applies two tricks on Lady Wishfort as her consent is required to get a share of Millamant's property. The characters are in search of

money and are always ready to get involved in intrigues to fulfill their desire. There is such a complex web of intrigues, marriages and love-affairs that we feel baffled and bewildered. We clearly get an impression that the Restoration society was love-ridden, intrigue-ridden, money-obsessed and marriage-obsessed. Apart from this, the women were fond of wearing tight dresses, wearing masks and going to the theatre. Lady Wishfort is worried about her looks even at the age of fifty-five. She possesses money but she lacks youth and beauty and in illusory search for the one, she loses her hold over the other. Her self-deception and refusal to accept the reality of her age and the decay of her charms rob her of her intelligence and make her vulnerable. She forgets to understand that beauty is transient and cannot be regained with the help of cosmetics. She turns out to be a comic figure in her remarks to Foible:

"Let me see the Glass- Cracks say'st thou?

Why I am arrantly flea'd? I look like an old peeled wall.

Thou must repair me, Foible, before Sir Rowland Comes"(III.i.149-51).

She suffers due to her inability to accept the reality of life but she is not a wicked woman and wins our sympathy when Fainall tries to blackmail her. We feel happy and relaxed when Mirabell saves her from the embarrassing situation in the closing scene of the play. Lady Wishfort lacks maturity and intelligence but even an intelligent woman like Millamant takes life lightly at many points. Millamant allows fools to hover around her. The psychology of these women has universal validity and cannot be treated as peculiar to the Restoration age.

The title of the play also helps in exposing the pseudo manners of the contemporary society. The theme of the play is established straightway by the title and the phrase '*The way of the world*' is repeated several times in the course of the play. It makes it clear that the play is about the 'way' and manners of the Restoration society. In the play, Fainall refers to his wife as "a very errant, rank wife, all in *The way of the world*"(IV.i.635-36). The full significance of the title comes out in the remarks of Mirabell: "Even so, Sir; it is *The way of the world*, Sir, of the widows of the world"(V.i.572-73). These words of Mirabell show that illicit love and adulterous relations were the accepted facts of the society. These were the ways of the fashionable world of the times. The real significance of the title is established by the fact that Congreve is concerned with the problem of social living. He seriously thinks of an alternative pattern of behaviour and an alternative set of codes of conduct. In essence, Congreve seems to understand the immorality and profaneness of society and the title serves as a weapon to attack the false manners of the contemporary society.

## Conclusion

Thus, an in-depth analysis of *The Way of the World* reveals that the play is a microcosm of the

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Restoration society. It deals with the themes of love, intrigues, marriage, adulterous relationships and legacy conflicts. Fops and fools are also presented to show the true face of the contemporary society. The people of the Restoration period, at large, had forgotten to be natural and the only norm that they followed was that of manners. After critical evaluation of the play, it becomes difficult to agree with Lamb who tries to prove that the world depicted in the Restoration period is an 'imaginary world' and has no reference to the world of reality. This view is not acceptable for the simple reason that English history to a large extent supports the picture of Restoration society as depicted in *The Way of the World*. The subject matter of the play is related to man's material existence and to his immediate environment, i.e. the social milieu in which he lives. The social pattern is given greater significance in the play and Congreve hopes to teach the individuals how to adjust to their environment.

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