

The Way of the World as a Typical Comedy of Manners

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Abstract

The Way of the World is an excellent example of Restoration comedy of manners in which Congreve shows himself to be at his best as far as wit and humour in the play is concerned. In *The Way of the World* Congreve attempts to create true wit in contrast to the attempted wit in such a manner that the audience may see the difference, Oscar Wilde created a world in which wit may never be truly false, as it will never be recognized as such. He stripped his characters of a true sense of personality and created them in a way they are more of his own echo rather than posing as individuals with their own voice. Consequently, they do not differ as much from each other as the characters in *The Way of the World* do and as a result the same distinction between false and true wit cannot be applied.

Key-Words: Wit, Humour, Artificial, Contemporary, Aristocratic

Paper

The Way of the World is a powerful Restoration drama where William Congreve has assimilated the tradition of Ben Jonson, Fletcher and Shirley and the French tradition of Moliere, Racine, and Corneille expressed in a compact, but complicated tightly knit network of comedy of intrigue, comedy

of humour and comedy of manners. That is why, the central thematic concern of *The Way of the World* as a comedy of manners lies in its powerful comedy of the socio-cultural stream of the restoration society with its complicated love intrigues, its intricate family relationships and its overlapping legal and money intrigues in which the dramatist appears to be highlighting

the human life, its values and manners along with the various means and ways of the world and hence, the title of the play.

Since, the play explores the external physical nuances and details of human behavior, so it has rightly been called artificial drama commenting on the various foibles and vices, ills and evils of the late seventeenth century. *The Way of the World* is a mature and powerful expression of society and human behavior artistically fused in to a single vision of life.

In exploring the contemporary life, William Congreve has focused on the institution of marriage and family which are the vital parts of the society in terms of an old lady Wishfort at the center surrounded by her daughter , Mrs. Fainall , her niece, Millamant, their family friend, Mrs. Marwood, their respective husbands and love Mr. Fainall, and Mirabell, assisted and

supported by the minor figures like Petulant, Witwoud, Foible, Mincing, Waitwell, and Sir Willful etc. What else can be more satirical and humorous than the scene in which Lady Wishfort, at the age of fifty-five, is unable to decide which dress to wear and which posture to maintain to welcome her perspective suitor, Sir Rowland in her house? How important the money matters are for these people can be gauged by the love-affair of Mirabell, first, with Mrs. Fainall; then the false pretension of love for lady Wishfort, and finally, to Millamant, but not going for marriage because of the fear of forfeiting six thousand pounds which are in Lady Wishfort's custody.

So, if Mirabell was genuinely in love with Mrs. Fainall, why should he get her married to a wicked man like Mr. Fainall? And, similarly, if Mirabell is sincerely in love with Millamant, why should he take recourse to intrigues instead of persuasion to bring around

lady Wishfort? Also, the role of Mrs. Marwood in this total network of filial relationships is not only vague and not well explained, but also leaves much to be desired. For instance, why should Mrs. Marwood chase a man like Mirabell who already was first in love with Mrs. Fainall and, then, Millamant? Even her motive in opposing the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant do not fill in the total thematic perspective of play.

However, the misfortune of lovers, followed by their perplexing social relationships and various intrigues in the play, *The Way of the World* gives us a kaleidoscopic expression of the habits, affection, fashion, behavior, morals and manners of the age. That is why, *The Way of the World* has rightly been called as a powerful comedy of manners full of verbal wit and intellectual exchange of dialogues. Due to wide ranging socio-cultural prospective, the plot construction of

The Way of the World is a loosely held tangled skein of various morals and manners of gentlemen society by the gentlemen group for the gentlemen audience.

In this way, the external behavior and manners of the contemporary society are scathingly exposed and ironically expressed even in the normal behavior as that of Sir Willful from the countryside who starts taking off his boots in the drawing room of lady Wishfort's house in London. *The Way of the World* has been called a comedy of intrigues because there are number of love intrigues as well as intrigues concerning money. The first intrigue of Mirabell boomerangs, and even his second intrigue of representing his servant, Waitwell as his uncle, Sir Rowland, is also scuttled by Mrs. Marwood. The intrigue of Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood to get hold of the total wealth of the family also suffers miscarriage.

However, the last intrigue of the lovers succeeds and the villains are forced to make a hasty retreat except the threat of divorce given by Mr. Fainall to Mrs. Fainall. The proviso scene in the play is a powerful exploration of the basis of a successful marriage life dramatized between Mirabell and Millamant which used to be very popular during the restoration period in which both the lovers lay-down their respective conditions for a happy and peaceful co-existence later on. Even the device of the black-box at the end of was a popular restoration feature which serves to neutralize the assault of villains on the normal life of the central figures in the play.

But, due to a blatant and exaggerated exposure of vices and weaknesses afflicting the vital institutions of human-life like marriage and family, these restoration plays in general, and *The Way of the World* in particular, have been called by Charles Lamb as

“unreal and immoral”, and even in the same vein, l.c. knights describes them as trivial, gross and dull.” Jeremy Collier has even gone a step ahead when he labels these plays as anti-social because of their being completely divorced from the contemporary reality”

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