

How Does Congreve Deal with the Various Themes in “The Way of the World?”

Writer: William Congreve | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

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William Congreve (1670-1729) was a prominent English playwright and poet of the Restoration period (1660-85). He is best known for his sharp wit and satirical approach. "The Way of the World" (1700) is one of his most famous works. This play explores various themes, including love, marriage, deception, and social status.

Love and Marriage: Congreve deals with the complexities of love and marriage in "The Way of the World." The play portrays marriage as a social contract often driven by financial and social considerations rather than genuine affection. For instance, Mirabell and Millamant's relationship stands out as one based on mutual respect and understanding. Millamant asserts her conditions for marriage, saying,

I hate a lover that can dare to think he draws a moment's air independent on the bounty of his mistress (Act IV, Scene IV).

This highlights her desire for equality and respect within the marriage. It contrasts with the more transactional view of marriage held by other characters.

Deception and Intrigue: Deception is a central theme in the play. It drives much of the plot's conflict and humor. The characters frequently engage in schemes and manipulations to achieve their goals. For example, Mirabell's elaborate plan to win Millamant's hand involves disguises and false identities. Lady Wishfort is deceived into believing Sir Rowland (actually Mirabell's servant, Waitwell) loves her. This theme underscores the duplicitous nature of social interactions in the play's setting.

Social Status and Wealth: Congreve examines how social status and wealth influence relationships and behavior. Characters often make decisions based on financial considerations. For instance, Fainall's marriage to Mrs. Fainall was motivated by her fortune, and he later schemes to control Lady Wishfort's wealth. Mirabell's concern for Millamant's dowry is also a

recurring issue. It emphasizes the mercenary nature of social alliances. Mirabell says,

I like her with all her faults; nay, like her for her faults.

These words indicate that true affection must navigate and accept the social pressures of wealth and status.

Gender Roles and Independence: The play also addresses the roles and independence of women in a patriarchal society. Millamant's assertiveness and desire for autonomy challenge traditional gender roles. Her negotiation with Mirabell about the terms of their marriage reflects her struggle for independence. She demands,

Let us never visit together, nor go to a play together; but let us be very strange and well-bred. (Act IV, Scene IV)

This line emphasizes her wish to maintain individuality within marriage. Mrs. Fainall and Lady Wishfort, too, exhibit varying degrees of independence and resistance to male dominance.

Morality and Hypocrisy: Congreve critiques the moral duplicity and hypocrisy prevalent in his society. Characters often present a façade of virtue while engaging in immoral actions. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood's affair and their subsequent schemes against others exemplify this hypocrisy. Lady Wishfort's outward show of propriety contrasts with her gullibility and vanity. We must all wear masks says Mrs. Marwood, summarizing the necessity of deceit in maintaining social decorum.

To conclude, in "The Way of the World," William Congreve masterfully weaves together themes of love, marriage, deception, social status, gender roles, and morality. His characters explore a world where appearances often deceive. Here, true intentions are masked by societal expectations. Through witty dialogue and intricate plotting, Congreve exposes the follies and pretensions of his time.