

The Way of the World as a comedy of Manners

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Comedy of Manners is a play that portrays satirical behaviour in a particular social group. Comedy of Manners was popularized in the Restoration Period (1660-1700). The Restoration Age began in 1660 when King Charles II was restored to the English throne. William Congreve's (1670-1729) famous play "The Way of the World" (1700) is one of the most remarkable works of comedy of manners. Throughout the play, Congreve brilliantly portrays the society of the Restoration Age.

The Note will cover the following questions:

- **What are the characteristics of the Restoration Age? What picture of society do you get in Congreve's The Way of the World?**
- **Or, Consider Way of the World as a comedy of Manners.**
- **Or, Discuss The Way of the World as a social satire.**

Marriage as a Social Contract:

In the Restoration Age, marriage was often seen as a deal or an agreement, not just about love. People got married for money or to improve their social position. In the play, Fainall marries Mrs. Fainall mainly for her money. Again, Mirabell and Millamant negotiate their marriage terms. Millamant demands her "liberty" and "freedom" even after marriage. She says,

One's cruelty is one's power.

Through these words, she expresses her fears over the matter of losing her liberty if she gets married.

The Illicit Love-affairs: In the Restoration Age, secret love affairs were common. The Way of the World highlights this through its characters. For example, Mrs Fainall and Mirabell had an affair before she married Fainall. Again, Fainall is married to Mrs Fainall but is having an affair with Mrs Marwood. This shows how love was often hidden and used for personal gain.

The Affectations for Fashionable Society: People in the Restoration Age were very concerned with looking good and fitting into fashionable society. Lady Wishfort, a character in

the play, is obsessed with her appearance and how others see her. She says,

Let me see the glass. Cracks, say'st thou? Why, I am arrantly flayed: I look like an old peeled wall.

This quote shows her fear of losing her beauty and her place in society.

Witty and Humorous Dialogue: Clever and funny conversations were highly valued in the Restoration Age. The characters in *The Way of the World* often engage in witty and humorous dialogue. The playwright has portrayed the characters Witwoud and Wilfull only to maintain this trend. We also find witty dialogue by Mirabell. For example, Mirabell says,

***Where modesty's ill manners, 'tis but fit
That impudence and malice pass for wit.***

This means that in society, being bold and clever was more admired than being modest. Such witty dialogue was a way for people to show their intelligence and social skills.

Domination of Intrigues: The Restoration society was full of intrigues, as shown in “*The Way of the World*.” The characters often engage in tricks to achieve their goals. Mr Fainall is not very interested in Mrs Fainall. He does not love her but marries her only to achieve her property. He also wants to take over Lady Wishfort's entire property based on an illegal document. Again, Mirabell plans to marry Millamant and secure her fortune through deceit and manipulation.

Role of Women: Women in the Restoration Age were often seen as needing to marry well to succeed. However, some women, like Millamant, wanted to be independent and make their own choices. Millamant says,

I'll never marry, unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure.

This means that women sometimes used their sharpness and independence to keep some control in a world ruled by men.

To conclude, “*The Way of the World*” gives us a clear picture of life during the Restoration Age. It shows us how love, marriage, cleverness, lies, and social status are all part of life. Through the characters and their actions, William Congreve helps us see the good and bad sides of society during that time.