

Congreve's The Way of the World: Restoration Comedy of Manners

This sort of comedy is called comedy of manners for the writers in the restoration theatre have shown the 'manners' and 'morals' of the ways of life of the higher class aristocratic fashionable society, however, not of the lower class or middle class society. The comedy of Manners emerged during the age of Dryden, the age of Restoration. Therefore it is also called Restoration Comedy. "The Restoration comedy of manners reached its fullest expression in *The Way of the World* (1700) by William Congreve, which is dominated by a brilliantly witty couple." The themes of the Restoration comedy of manners are love, marriage, adulterous relationships amours and legacy conflicts; and the characters generally include would be wits, jealous husbands, conniving rivals and foppish dandies. It "relies for comic effect in large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue- often in the form of repartee, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match." Now let us evaluate Congreve's *The Way of the World* as a comedy of manners.

The society depicted in *The Way of the World* is the upper class fashionable society of London. The action of the play takes place in three places. The first is the chocolate House which was used for socializing and entertainment during the Restoration. The second is St James's Park in London where the upper class people walked before dinner. Witwoud says,

"We'll all walk in the park; the ladies talked of being there."

The third is the house of Lady Wishfort, an aristocratic woman.

Most of the male and female characters of the play are cultured, talented, formal, artificial, fashionable, depraved, 'cold' and 'courtly'. Their qualities are actually a part of Restoration age culture.

The Restoration period was an age of loose morals and, and was devoid of moral values. *The Way of the World* contains this current through the illicit love and adulterous relations – e.g. relation between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, between Mirabell, the hero, and Mrs. Fainal. Mirabell married Mrs. Fainall off to Fainal, being afraid of her being pregnant. Fainall's illicit relationship with Mrs. Marwood having been exposed, Fainall faces the situation fearlessly and shamelessly:

"If it must all come out, why let 'them know it; it's but the way of the world." Even Mrs. Marwood and Lady Wishfort secretly loved Mirabell. Unhappy

conjugal life can be treated as another characteristic of the time which is expressed through the relation between Mr. and Mrs. Fainall. One of them feels uneasy in the presence of another. Mrs. Fainall expresses her uneasiness in St James's park in the presence of her husband-

“He turned sort upon me unaware, and had almost overcome me.”

The Way of The World also exposes the worldliness and greed of the young men of the time. Mercenary motives led them to seek rich heiresses in marriage. Mr. Fainall marries Mrs. Fainall, a widow, for her property. Mirabell does not want to marry Millamant without her property.

This mercenary tendency led them to intrigue which was the order of the day in social and domestic life. Mirabell, in order to obtain Millamant with her whole legacy, pretends to woo Lady Wishfort. He marries his servant to Wishfort's maid and sends his servant as Sir Roland to Lady Wishfort so that the servant can make a marriage contact with the lady. By this intrigue, Mirabell makes Lady Wishfort agree – “Upon condition that she consents to [his] marriage with her niece,

And surrender[s] the moiety of her fortune in her possession.”

In The Way of The World, we are acquainted with the vanities, affectations and fashions of the time. Mirabell satirically remarks in the proviso scene on women's fondness of wearing masks, going to the theatre with or without their husbands' knowledge, idle gossip, slandering the absent friends etc. In her contact with Mirabell, Millamant proves her habit of late rising, contemplation in solitude, general laziness etc. She says,

“I'll ye abed in a morning as long as I please.”

Mirabell also ridicules pregnant women's wearing tight dresses in order to maintain their figure which can actually deform their children. Moreover, intelligent women like Millamant allowed a crowd of admirers to a school of fools to gather around them in order to show their demand and worth. Millamant's vanity is revealed in causing her lover pain to have a sense of power:

“One's cruelty is one's power.”

Above all, Lady Wishfort, a higher class fashionable lady, seeks a husband in her age of fifty five. Mirabell ridicules her saying,

“The good lady would marry anything that resembled a man.”

And the make-up and dressing up of women of the society is expressed in the speech of the footman about Lady Wishfort of the house-

“I cannot swear to her face in a morning, before she is dressed.”

The upper class people could give up anything only to maintain/save the family name and fame. Lady Wishfort wants to conceal the scandal of her daughter by any means. She says,

“I’ll compound, I’ll give up all, myself and my all, my niece and her all- anything, everything for composition.”

The Way of The World brings before us witty Restoration ladies and gentlemen even their servants and fools are witty. As a result, the dialogue is throughout witty which is something unrealistic.. Therefore the play, like other plays of its kind, is called an ‘artificial’ comedy.

In this play, Witwoud and Petulant are presented as fops and false wits, the so-called ‘fine gentlemen’. Their pastime is to accompany ladies and passing vulgar remarks at them. They are Millament’s suitors for ‘fashions sake’. Their air and activities amuse us. Sir Wilfull, Witwoud’s brother, calls Witwoud, “the fashion’s a fool; and you’re a fop, dear brother.” Petulant hires women to come and ask for him at the chocolate – house. Fainall says about his purpose,

“This is in order to have something to brag of the next-time he makes Court to Millament, and swear he has abandoned the whole sex for her sake.”

The city dwellers do not want to relate themselves with their country relations. Witwoud pretends not to know his half- brother Wilfull, and comments,

“’tis not modish to know relations in town.”

Complicated plot construction is also regarded as a quality of comedy of manners. In this play, the five acts contain sixty five scenes in total, and there are very complicated relations among the characters. Such as, Mirabell, the hero is loved by Millament, Mrs. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood, and even Lady Wishfort secretly.

The discussion above makes it very much clear that The Way of the World presents a faithful picture of the manners of the restoration and the eighteenth century social picture. The presentation is full of comedy and satire. Thus the play is a good example of restoration comedy of manners.