

The Way of the World as a representative Restoration Comedy

William Congreve's last play *The Way of the World* is the best and brilliant example of Restoration comedy of manners. Comedy of manners is related to human behaviours. The comedy arises not because of the person lacks certain, manner, but the norms of social behaves.

It lies in incongruous (behaviour and nature). This gives rise to gallant, fop, rake and wit. So, the humour and wit become important. The play *The Way of the World* by William Congreve represents the real picture of contemporary society of his time. It is a fine flower of Restoration literature (comedy of manners). The entire play is set in London and this urban setting keeps especial importance. Restoration comedy does not represent every strata of people. It basically represents metropolitan aristocratic society. In this period country people were ridiculed for the lack of sophistication.

When the play was first performed in 1700 it was not a huge success, but later on it was realized that the play is a classic example of comedy of manners and Congreve's masterpiece. The title of the play is rightly suitable, first, it is inspired by the then social period during which the play was originally performed. Secondly, as a comedy of manners, it makes fun of human follies and silly social behaviours. The play transcends the time and remains a timeless comedy.

As with all comedies of this type, the play is full of many sexual and vulgar witticism scenes. The Act 1 begins in the chocolate house where many people come to enjoy. Similarly, Act II begins in St. James Park. The park suggests something as freedom. This is a public place where basically fashionable people use to go to exchange their heart and to be free. Act III, too, begins in Lady Wishfort's house, but the very scene is in the toilet. Remaining inside the toilet, Lady Wishfort is talking to Peg in serious matters. It clearly shows that how restoration people take the serious things lightly. In Act IV, Lady Wishfort and Foible are talking the arrival of Sir Roland. Lady Wishfort orders to Foible to arrange the things in order and she also asks for dancer and musician if he (Sir Roland) wants to entertain. It is the showy nature of the Restoration period (people). Because people like Lady Wishfort is very much concerned on how to perceive and impress man in his first visit. As a result, she talks how to sit, how to walk, how to talk in front of him. She says, 'I will walk from the door upon his entrance

and how do I look?' These some events clearly show that how the restoration people are very pedantic in their fashion and outer appearance.

In the same way, in another scene, Millamant talks with her lover Mirabell that she does not like to be familiar or found, she rejects to go any park not she plays together, even after the marriage, and she wants to be like unmarried one. Likewise, she wants liberty to write letters, to receive letters, to talk with a lover, to have dinner with him and to bring him in her dressing room. Even her husband must knock the door, before entering the room if her lover is inside the room. These are the general condition she talks with Mirabell before getting married. This is what actually the Restoration period was.

In the play male characters are pursuing women. We can take the instance of Mirabell, Witwood, Petuland and Fainall who seem adulterous and deceptive. It was because fashionable to court a young and beautiful woman in the contemporary society. In the play, everyone plots against everyone and deceives everyone. And the play begins, we know that Mirabell pretends to love Lady Wishfort in order to be touched with Millamant, the single heir of the property. Mr. Fainall, the fortune hunter is also committed to get Millamant's fortune at hand. We find the characters in disguise and they do their best to be what they are not. To pretend to be what one is not is the way of the world. So, the title itself suggests the manner of Restoration urban aristocrats.

Restoration as a historical period was a time when England was an established colonial power in the world. It was a time of materialism and commerce and the people of the period emphasized money, pleasure and sex. Love and marriage were judged in terms of money. Artificiality and immorality were the defining features of the age. People looked towards relaxation and pleasure and serious things mattered less to them.

By highlighting these things, *The Way of the World* exposes the issues of money, love, sex, marriage and in short, the behaviour of the people of the time in the language of prose. The rakes, fops, gallants and wits are the primary types dealt with in a language that is outwardly brilliant but lacking philosophical and emotional or psychological depth. This makes the play a typical restoration comedy of manners. The mode employed is satiric and ironic which befits the social reality of the time.

In the restoration period there was a moneyed class with leisure. Pursuit of sexual pleasure and money was the main concern of the people. Marriage was not just like as an institution for procreation or for providing stability to social life. It was seen as a mercenary venture. *The Way of the World* contains characters who resort to sexual innuendos and vulgar jokes. Humour and wit are the key ingredients of this play. The characters represent many aspects of the society of the time and the aristocracy in particular. Mirabell is a wit and a manipulator. He uses language in a very witty manner. The clever use of language makes his speech brilliant on the surface, but it has no psychological depth underneath. He pretends to love Lady Wishfort so that he can move closer to Millamant. His eyes are on her fortune. Love and marriage are guided by a desire for material gain. Fainall, the villain of the play is intent on laying his hand on Lady Wishfort's fortune. He marries Mrs. Fainall not because his love for her is true, but because he takes it as a mercenary venture. Millamant is a typical Restoration Coquette and Mirabell, a representative beau. Petualant and Witwood are the typical fops of Restoration drama. They are more concerned with dress and appearance than with anything else.

Use of wit is a remarkable aspect of Restoration Comedy. The characters use language in a very tricky and clever way. Use of repartee basically refers to quick replies while the report is related to sharp return in speech. Wit was a sharp weapon in the late seventeenth century, to be used for the amusement of those intelligent enough to follow the exchange. While talking to Mrs. Fainall, Mirabell provides an example of wit as he comments on early eighteenth-century marriage. He says, "You should have just so much disgust for your husband as may be sufficient to make you relish your lover." The whole plot of the play revolves around the issues of adultery, marriage and fortune hunting. As we see the plot unfold the characters reveal themselves through their pursuits and behaviour. The way they behave makes laughter inevitable. Through this Congreve is satirizing the behaviour of the people of then English society. It is a typical Restoration Comedy of Manners.

Since the age was not capable of feeling the intensity of tragic emotions, witty and light hearted dramatic stuff worked much better with them. The shallowness and vulgarity of the time are convincingly brought to light. The play is written in prose to depict the age of commerce and money. The language of money is the number and prose, not the poetry. The play does not end with everyone happy, but Mirabell and

Millamant possess the advantage and look forward to marriage. Finally, all deception is revealed, the proper lovers are joined, and the complications are smoothed out. As the play carefully examines the relationships between the sexes and the impediments a sophisticated society throws between them the play transcends its age and becomes a timeless comedy. As it embodies the major features of the Restoration Comedy of manners, it is a representative play of the age. It is a brilliant comedy of manners. By holding up to ridicule the foibles and follies of the age, it shows ways to social reform which is what a comedy basically does.