

A Prismatic View of Restoration Comedy with Reference to Congreve's *The Way of the World*

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Abstract

William Congreve was one of the rebuilding age's most celebrated writers. *The Way of the World* represents the personal view of Congreve of the Restoration culture and city life, full of its artificiality and rigidity. *The Way of the World* exhibits an appropriate picture of the habits of the rebuilding and the eighteenth-century social description. French was a language of design around them. The writing style of Congreve reveals both intellect and compassion. The purpose of writing this research paper is to show how Congreve's play *The Way of the World* is a Restoration comedy and how Congreve depicted the high society of London. Finding unpredictable connections is one of the hard things. Restoration Comedy burst on to the English drama after Charles II revived the theatre in 1660, a new kind of comedy, which remained the theatre's preferred style for the rest of the century.

Keywords: Comedy, Society, Fashionable, World, Upper-class, Life, Age.

About William Congreve (1670-1729)

William Congreve, the most brilliant writer, was born in January 1670 in Bardsey, Yorkshire, England. His parents were William Congreve and Mary. Young Congreve attended school at Kilkenny College, Ireland. He and his friend Jonathan Swift entered Trinity College, Dublin, in

1686. In 1688, he started writing his first play, *The Old Bachelor*. In 1691, he contemplated law at the Middle Temple in London, although he spends much of his time writing. His companionship with Dryden, Swift and Alexander Pope started. He was lucky enough to have Jonathan Swift as his

schoolmate. Congreve never married, but he was fond of the actress, Mrs. Bracegirdle, who played leading roles in all his plays, including the part of Mrs. Millamant in *The Way of the World*. He was also the lover of the second Duchess of Marlborough and fathered her illegitimate younger daughter named Lady Mary, who became the Duchess of Leeds. He left most of his estate to the Duchess of Marlborough, when he died in 1729, at the age of fifty-nine. He is known for his comedies. William Congreve is the best and the most excellent essayist of the comedy of manners.

His best-known comedies are: -

1. The Old Bachelor (1693)
2. The Double Dealer (1693)
3. Love for Love (1695) {dedicated to Earl of Dorset}
4. The Mourning Bride (1697) {one poetic tragedy}
5. The Way of the World (1700)

Congreve may be the only writer to be related to Moliere. He was a follower of John Dryden. Congreve may be truly acclaimed as the father of the English Comedy of Manners. He wrote all his plays before he was thirty years of age.

About Restoration Period (1640-1702)

The era from 1660-1700 is known as the Restoration Era or the Dryden Era. In this year, Charles II was welcomed to the position of authority; revived theatre in 1660. Puritanism was discarded entirely. During the Puritan period, theatres were closed, which became functional in this Restoration Age. The foundation of the Royal Society was a milestone throughout the entire existence of England. The French influence was more dominant during the Restoration Age. The French writers like Corneille, Racine, and Moliere were imitated. With the coming of Charles II back to England, a great change came into the social and political life of the English people. Restoration Age heralded the birth of a new age. The atmosphere of hilarity and cheerfulness was revived. It was a time of materialism; the people of the period emphasized trade, wealth, pleasure, and sex. There are many literary characteristics observable during this period: -

- i Rise of Neo-Classicism
- ii Imitation of the Ancient
- iii Imitation of French masters
- iv Lack of creativity and imagination
- v Realism and Formalism
- vi Break from the Elizabethan Tradition
- vii Directness and simplicity of expression

About Restoration Comedy of Manners

‘Restoration Comedies are a world of themselves almost as much as fairyland.’

(Charles Lamb)

Around 1660 and 1700, Restoration comedy was written and performed. Restoration Comedy is a fruitful kind of Literature. Restoration Comedy is used as a synonym for the Comedy of Manners. During the Dryden Age or the Restoration Period, the comedy of manners developed. Ben Johnson popularizes the comedy of manners. Characters in the Restoration period reflect human psychology. The term Comedy of Manners is useful for the comic plays, which flourished in England during the period of Restoration. The Restoration Comedy was the realistic comedy of Ben Jonson and his followers. The comedy of manners is a true reflection of the temper of the upper-class marriages and Adulterous relationship. The Restoration comedy takes its origin from both Ben Jonson’s English comedy of humour as well as the French comedy of Moliere. Comic scenes were laid in London, particularly in cafes, chocolate houses, clubs and gambling centres. There was a gentle way of carrying on love affairs. One of the pivotal qualities of the Restoration comedy is the witty exchange of words, and dialogues are sharp and funny. Playwrights that have achieved lasting fame are: -

1. William Wycherley (The Country Wife, 1675)
2. George Etherege (The Man of Mode, 1676)
3. Aphra Behn (The Rover, 1677)
4. John Vanbrugh (The Relapse, 1696)
5. William Congreve (The Way of the World, 1696)

Oscar Wilde and William Congreve are the most celebrated authors of Comedy of Manners. The successors of the Elizabethan age continue to overshadow Restoration comedy. Restoration Comedy kept all aspects of its audience satisfied by combining irony with dark comedy such as farce and parody. Playwrights have been able to write about romance, courtship, marriage, and sex during the Restoration period. The themes of the Restoration Comedy of Manners are Love, Marriage, Adulterous Relationship, and Legacy Conflicts. The period of Restoration was an era of loose morals and was devoid of moral values. Some of the essential features of Comedy of Manners are as follows: -

- i The action takes place in London.
- ii There is always a distinction between rural and urban. For example, Squire Witwound is from the country of Shropshire in Congreve’s *The Way of the World*, and his appearance in London brings a great deal of laughter and humour.

- iii At least one pair of knowledgeable young lovers should have the presence.
- iv Witty dialogue may be a necessary element of the Comedy of Manners.
- v The women in the plays are very confident and independent.
- vi These plays depicted the way of life of London city very practically.

Most important and thrilling is the heroine in these kinds of plays than heroes. Sir George Etherege is the Comedy of Manners's first and foremost writer. He has left three comedies. They are: -

- i Love in a Tub
- ii She would if She could
- iii The Man of Mode

Etherege was concerned with morals and not with manners. For its obscenity and immorality, the comedy of manners has been criticized. Like an expert jeweller, Congreve polished the Restoration Comedy of manners to its full shine and sparkle. Most Restoration Comedies begin with the struggle for money, sex, and power and finishes with the marriage. Vanbrugh and George Farquhar kept alive something of the spirit of Restoration Comedy of Manners, after Congreve.

The gist of Congreve's play the Way of the World

The Way of the World by Congreve is a traditional five-act play with prologue and epilogue. Each act is disrupted into several scenes. Congreve's followed Aristotle's three unities of time, place, and action in his play. The play's action takes place in three locations. The first is the chocolate house that was used to socialize and entertain during the Restoration Period. The second is St. James Park in London, where the members of the upper class strolled before dinner. The third one is the house of Lady Wishfort, an aristocratic woman. The whole play is about suspense.

Mirabell has had an illicit relationship with Mrs. Fainall. But he persuades her to marry Fainall. She has a soft corner for Mirabell, since her marriage. Fainall marries her only for getting her property. He flirts behind her, with Mrs. Marwood. In spite of her old age, Lady Wishfort wants to marry some young man. She uses cosmetics to hide her faded beauty and wrinkles. Four fully acknowledged characters are at the core of the story – Mirabell and Millamant, the hero and heroine, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, the two antagonists whose strategies move the play.

Mirabell loves Millamant, and to marry her, he approached her guardian Lady Wishfort. When she found the truth, she used to hate Mirabell and started a search for her niece

Millamant. Mirabell planned to trick Lady Wishfort. He disguised his valet Waitwell as his Uncle Sir Rowland. Lady Wishfort accepts the marriage proposal of Sir Rowland, thinking that if Mirabell's uncle gets married, then Mirabell can't inherit his uncle's property. Mrs. Marwood comes to know about the affair between Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell. Mrs. Marwood went straight to Fainall and told everything of what she overheard. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood planned to get money from Lady Wishfort by threatening to damage her daughter's reputation by revealing her affair with Mirabell. They showed to Lady Wishfort informing her about Mirabel's trick. Fainall blackmailed Lady Wishfort to give all her property to him. He also tells Lady Wishfort not to marry in her lifetime. Waitwell and Foible proved that Fainall is also disloyal to his wife by keeping illicit affair with Mrs. Marwood. He said he was not afraid of anyone, but he will disclose Mrs. Fainall's relationship with Mirabell in public. To save Lady Wishfort, Millamant agreed to marry Sir Wilfull, according to Lady Wishfort's wish.

Fainall was not ready to accept his defeat. He demanded his wife's share from her property. At that time, Mirabell entered and showed the document, which said that Mrs. Fainall's money belongs to Mirabell. Mrs. Fainall and

Mirabell signed this agreement at the time of Fainall's marriage as they doubted Fainall. Knowing the real villains as Fainall and her close friend, Mrs. Marwood, Lady Wishfort forgave Mirabell and accepted the union of Mirabell and Millamant. Congreve's *The Way of the World* ends happily.

The Way of the World as a Restoration Comedy

The Way of the World is considered to be the flower of the Restoration Comedy. This play is an excellent example of the specialized ability of Congreve as a playwright. The main aim is to hit at the follies and foibles of people. *The Way of the World* is one of the wittiest plays ever written, a play that can be read slowly. The dialogues were funny and brilliant; the plot is an intricate puzzle. It was not successful when it was presented in 1700. *The Way of the World* has all the essential features of the Comedy of Manners. The society represented in *The Way of the World* is London's contemporary culture of the upper class. The main objective of the Restoration comedy was to ridicule or scrutinize society. These kinds of comedies allowed the audience to laugh at themselves and society. Most of the play's male and female characters are brilliant, formal, artificial, fashionable, depraved, and cold, and these qualities are a part of the Restoration Age. In this play, love and

money play an essential role. Wit, Humour, and irony can be found throughout the play in the character's dialogues. There is no coherence in the play, and the plot is complex and confusing. The key ingredients of this play are humor and wit.

The love-scenes were shadowed off with tenderness and sensitivity between Mirabell and Millamant. Millamant is a strong advocate of the rights of women. In this play, Congreve deals with a serious theme of sexual relationships through a variety of characters and situations. There is genuine love between Millamant and Mirabell. Mirabell is a wit and a manipulator. He uses language in a very tricky and intelligent way. Wit was a sharp tool to be used for amusement in the late seventeenth century. Women characters were fond of wearing masks. He pretends to love Lady Wishfort to move closer to Millamant. His eyes are on her money. Persons like Lady Wishfort are exceptionally stressed about how to please and decipher men during his first visit. The proviso-scene shows attitude towards love and marriage. The affection and trust shared between two intelligent and subordinate characters were exemplified in Restoration Comedy against the picture of deceptions, instability, and jealousy illustrated by the social world around them. Love intrigues have an essential place in the comedy of

manners. In the provisional scene, both Mirabell and Millamant pretend that they are not desperately in love. Marriage becomes more about contractual agreements and greed than love. The entire play deals with the intrigues of Mirabell to gain the hand of Millamant. To achieve his goal, he pretends to make love to Lady Wishfort, an aged lady. Millamant says that she would hate a lover who can live independently of his mistress even for a moment. She says that she would not like to be addressed as a wife, spouse, and my dear, sweetheart, love, etc. Millamant needs freedom to compose letters, to chat with anyone, to have dinner with him. She would always want her better-half to thump at the entryway before going into the room if her sweetheart is inside the room. She pleases to write and receive letters without being asked any questions by her husband. Mirabella's love for wealth is more than his passion for Millamant. The violent scenes between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood remind us of those between Maskwell and Lady Touchwood in *The Double Dealer*. *The Way of the World* resembles *The Double Dealer*.

The play reflects the satire and criticism of upper-class people, which includes their attitudes and actions. A desire for material gain is motivated by love and marriage.

Conclusion

The Way of the World includes all of Restoration Comedy's characteristics. To sum up, in the Restoration era, the main goal of the comedy of manners is to ridicule society. Congreve dedicated his play *The Way of the World* to Ralph, Earl of Montague, whose company has enabled Congreve to compose the comedy. *The Way of the World* is known for the best experimental comedy. Confused plot development is likewise viewed as a nature of the comedy of manners. Mirabell is the protagonist of the play, and the antagonists are Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. The play ends as a comedy, as Mirabell defeats the antagonist in the play. This play reflects the Restoration society, and it revolves around the hero winning the heroine along with her fortune overcoming the obstacles. One can summarize social life into three stages: - i. Wealth ii. Woman iii. Wine.

Mr. Fainall craves for wealth, Petulant for woman, Sir Willful for wine, and Lady Wishfort for a man. The entire play revolves around adultery, marriage, and money issues. In the play, everybody plots against everybody and bamboozles everybody. The pursuit of sexual pleasure and money was the primary concern of the people. The whole plot of the play revolves around the issues of adultery, marriage, and money.

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