

Themes of "The Way of the World"

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'The Way of the World' is one of the finest plays written by William Congreve. Some of the critics consider it as the masterpiece of Congreve.

Swainburne describes 'The Way of the World' as "the unequalled and unapproached masterpiece of English Comedy". It was the last play of Congreve which was produced in 1700. He wrote this play to please himself rather than the public.

The play has many themes like love, money, intrigue but the main theme deals with the ways of the world of high class men and women of London in the year 1670. The title, thus, sums up, the main events and principal characters of the play. The characters introduced here are typical of that age. They have no feelings. They have only intellectual wits. They are cynical and heartless. Even a good man like Mirabell plots to humiliate Lady Wishfort by sending an imposter to make love to her. And her own daughter (who is otherwise a good lady) does not mind her mother being humiliated in this way. The men introduced here have only two aims in life - love and lucre. The main business of all men seems to be the pursuit of women. The women (all widows) are members of cabal-nights where they all pretend to hate men. But they all love to be pursued by young men.

Theme of Love :- Certainly the play can be seen as a dramatic presentation of varieties of love in the England of the year 1700. The most graceful aspect of love is seen in the relations of Mirabell and Millamant. They represent the ideal of the Restoration attitude, intense yet balanced, their love based on mutual esteem with no surrender of individuality. In contrast with it are Mirabell's earlier and quite ambiguous love affair with Mrs. Fainall. Their relationships were very intimate but they did not get married. Apart from marrying with Fainall, she has no grudge against Mirabell but has friendly terms with him and helps him in all his plots.

On the other hand, the play focuses upon the illicit love of Fainall and Miss Marwood. It shows passionate relation, but wholly without mutual trust. Then we have Sir Willful's crude attempts to make love to Millamant. At the other extreme we have the longings of Lady Wishfort to have a young husband in her old age. Her attempts to appear young and beautiful in order to impress Sir Rowland are ridiculous and at the same time pathetic in the extreme. Thus, we find all the varieties of love in this play.

Theme of Money - Money plays an important role in the play. Millamant loves Mirabell

gincerely but she knows that marriage without money would be a sentimental folly. So, she agrees to marry Sir Willfull in order to save her property. Lady Wishfort has her hold on Millamant only because of money. Even Waitwell agreed to marry Foible and act as Sir Rowland only on the promise of a handsome reward. Fainall too married the widow of Mr. Languish because she was the only daughter of a rich widow. His intention was that Millamant should marry Mirabell against the wishes of her aunt and so her property should come to his wife and so indirectly to him. Thus, Money plays an important part in the play.

Theme of Intrigue: — It is the main theme of the play "The Way of the World." All the main characters of the play are involved in intrigues. Mirabell intrigues to gain consent to his marriage from Lady Wishfort and this involves intrigue within intrigue, for he does not trust Waitwell. Mirabell wishes to put Lady Wishfort in such a compromising situation that Mirabell alone can relieve her of the trouble and he will do so after the lady agrees to his union with Millamant. He prepares his servant, Waitwell, to make love to Lady Wishfort in the disguise of his imaginary uncle, Sir Rowland. Even Lady Wishfort in her willingness to marry Sir Rowland

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has a devious purpose - revenge on Mirabell. Finally Mirabel gets the hand of Millamant not because he is the best person in the play but because he is the most successful intriguer.