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# *The Way of the World*

by

**William Congreve**

**1700**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

*The Way of the World* reflects Congreve's special view of the "the world" of Restoration society. Congreve follows the practice of the earlier Restoration dramatists by setting Act I in a public place, a fashionable chocolate-house where Mirabell and Fainall are engaged in a game of cards. Act II is set in St. James' Park, which is again a fashionable outdoor location of the kind frequently used by the.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Mirabell** - The protagonist, who is madly in love with Millamant. He appears to represent the typical beau of Restoration drama, but as the action progresses, Mirabell reveals his individual qualities. He .....

**Millamant** - The lively and beautiful heroine who is in love with Mirabell. She is Lady Wishfort's ward and the first cousin of Mrs. Fainall. She seems to be the typical Restoration coquette, pursued by.....

**Fainall** - Fainall is married to Lady Wishfort's daughter. During the course of the play, he.....

**Mrs. Fainall (formerly, Arabella Languish)** - She is Lady Wishfort's daughter. She has been Mirabell's mistress in the past. As a wealthy young widow, she married Fainall only to provide a cover for.....

**Mrs. Marwood** - She is Fainall's mistress. Along with Fainall, she performs the role of the antagonist. Mrs. Marwood reveals to Lady Wishfort that Mirabell's love for her is only a cover for his real love for.....

**Lady Wishfort** - She is a fifty-five year-old widow who desperately wants another husband. She is Mrs. Fainall's mother and Millamant's aunt. She detests Mirabell because he pretended to love.....

#### Minor Characters

**Witwoud** - He is the typical Restoration fop (a foolish and conceited man, who is usually preoccupied ....

**Petulant** - He is Witwoud's friend and prides himself on being a fop. He is the most irritating character in....

**Sir Wilfull Witwoud** - He is Lady Wishfort's nephew and the half-brother of Witwoud. He is .....

**Waitwell** - He is Mirabell's valet. Mirabell has him marry Foible to further his secret plan to win Millamant. He plays a significant role in advancing the plot. He poses as Mirabell's uncle, who has.....

**Foible** - She is Lady Wishfort's maid, who marries Waitwell. She cooperates with Mirabell in.....

**Mincing** - She is Millamant's maid. She reveals Mrs. Marwood's affair with Fainall.

**Peg** - She is Lady Wishfort's maid.

**Betty** - She is the waiting-woman in the chocolate-house and speaks only a few lines.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Mirabell is the protagonist and controls the action of the play. *The Way of the World* is essentially about Mirabell and his love for Millamant, and he holds the.....

**Antagonist** - Fainall and Mrs. Marwood perform the roles of the antagonists and villains in the play. They are diametrically opposed to Mirabell and Millamant. Both of them have clearly defined.....

**Climax** - The plot rises to an intense climax in Act IV, when Sir Rowland's wooing of.....

**Outcome** - The play ends in comedy, as Mirabell defeats the counter plot of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. He produces a deed in which Mrs. Fainall had earlier signed over her fortune in trust to him. Therefore, Fainall cannot claim this money, which no longer belongs to his wife. Fainall and.....

## **SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

*The Way of the World* represents the pinnacle of Congreve's achievement even though it was not successful on the stage when it was first performed in 1700, largely due to the play's complexity. Although the play has only one main plot and covers a single day, it is crowded with numerous events and intrigues. The plot of *The Way of the World* seems to follow a logic of its own. Before the action of the play unfolds, certain events are understood to have previously taken place. Mirabell, a typical Restoration beau, is devising a secret scheme to win Millamant's hand in marriage, gaining her fortune as well. Lady Wishfort is opposed to this match because her vanity has been offended by Mirabell, who earlier pretended to court her although he was really in love with Millamant, her ward. Mrs. Marwood, Fainall's mistress, has revealed Mirabell's deception to Lady Wishfort out of jealousy, since she herself loves Mirabell. The problem arises from the fact that half of Millamant's fortune of six thousand pounds is under Lady Wishfort's control and will be given to her only if she marries the suitor chosen by her.

Act I opens at a fashionable chocolate-house where Fainall has just beaten Mirabell in a game of cards. A footman arrives with the news that Mirabell's valet, Waitwell, has married Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. This marriage is directly connected to Mirabell's secret scheme of winning Millamant, the details of which are not revealed in this act. Through the conversation between Witwoud and Petulant, the audience learns.....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme is indicated by Congreve in the title itself. The phrase, *the way of the world*, indicates .....

### **Minor Themes**

Several minor themes pervade the play. There is the romantic theme of the hero who proves his worth and finally wins the fair heroine. The importance of money to.....

## **MOOD**

As the play focuses on the exposure of follies, the mood is tinged with satire. Even though the play.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

William Congreve (1670-1729) was born on January 24, 1670, at Bardsey, near Leeds, in Yorkshire. He was the son of an army officer who became the steward to the Earl of Cork. Congreve studied at Kilkenny School, where he received a classical education. At the same time, Jonathan Swift, who was two years his senior, was a student at Kilkenny College. Congreve then entered Trinity College in Dublin at the age of sixteen; he was again a contemporary of Jonathan Swift at Trinity. Congreve's interest in drama developed at Trinity.

It is significant that the formative years of Congreve's life were spent in Ireland, since Ireland has become almost synonymous with comic writers in English literature, such as Swift, Sterne, Sheridan, Wilde, and Shaw. He, however, left Ireland before he could complete his degree. Civil disturbances during the Jacobite War of

1688 resulted in James II's losing the throne and forced the temporary closure of Trinity College. Congreve went to England, where he first stayed with his dying grandfather at Stretton in Staffordshire and.....

## **LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

*The Way of the World* (1700) is Congreve's best experimental comedy even though he employs a typical plot formula for a Restoration comedy of manners. The world of the play reflects Congreve's own society and revolves around a witty young man winning a lady and her fortune after overcoming the obstacles posed by antagonistic parents and other suitors. Both Mirabell and Millamant wish to marry each other and still enjoy the six thousand pounds inheritance that she will receive if she marries the suitor chosen by her aunt. The plot is complicated by the ways of the world. Mirabell has offended Lady Wishfort and is opposed by Fainall and his mistress, Mrs. Marwood. Fainall is a fortune hunter who has set his eyes on Millamant's money and hopes to have the money pass to Mrs. Fainall so that he can reach it. Both Fainall and Mrs. Marwood.....

## **ACT / SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS**

### **DEDICATION**

#### **Summary**

Congreve dedicates his play, *The Way of the World*, to Ralph, Earl of Montague, whose company and conversation have made it possible for Congreve to write this comedy. The dedication also constitutes a statement of purpose. Congreve writes that he is aware that the world may charge him with vanity for dedicating his play to the earl. However, he is certain that the world cannot think "meanly" of a play that is meant for the earl's perusal. Conversely, if the play is attributed "too much sufficiency," it would be an extravagant claim, and merit the test of the earl's judgment. Congreve humbly states that the earl's favorable reception of the play will more than compensate for the play's deficiencies, and he praises the earl lavishly for his patronage.

Congreve does not expect the play to succeed on the stage, since he is aware that he is not catering to the current tastes of Restoration society. Congreve states his dissatisfaction with the kind of comedies being written. He points out that the characters meant to be ridiculed in these comedies are largely "gross fools" who can only disturb an audience, rather than stimulate their reflective judgment. Congreve asserts that instead of moving the audience to laughter, comic characters should excite compassion.

Congreve's dissatisfaction with the contemporary comic mode has led him to design comic characters who will do more than merely appear ridiculous. The "affected wit" of his characters shall be exposed and held up for the audience's ridicule. Congreve defines this as "a wit, which at the same time that it is affected, is also false." Congreve is aware of the difficulty involved in the creation of such complex characters. He is also aware that his play may not succeed on stage because many people come to the theater prepared to criticize a play without understanding its purpose. Congreve then apologizes for his digression and entrusts his play to the earl's protection, claiming that only his patronage and the approval of like-minded people will provide recognition to writers of merit.

Congreve holds Terence, an ancient Roman author of comedies, as his model. He states that Terence benefited from the encouragement of Scipio and Lelius. Congreve laments that the majority of Terence's audience was incapable of appreciating the purity of his style, his delicacy of plot construction, and the aptness of his characters. Congreve then sketches a brief history of classical comedy in which he mentions Terence's models and traces the source of his inspiration back to Aristotle. Congreve emphasizes the importance of patronage and claims that contact with such superior people is the only means of attaining perfection in dialogue.

Congreve proceeds to attribute all that is best in his style to the society of Ralph, Earl of Montague. He further praises the earl by stating that if this play suffers from any deficiency, it is his (Congreve's) fault, since he could

not rise to the stature of Terence even though the earl was his patron. Congreve then mentions that although poetry is “the eldest sister of all arts and parent of most,” the earl has never before given a poet his patronage. Poetry addresses itself to the good and great. This relationship is reciprocal: it is the privilege of poetry to address them, and it is their right alone to grant it patronage.

Many writers dedicate their works to the good and the great. But Congreve pleads that his address may be exempt from all the trappings of a typical dedication. He states that he is dedicating his play to the earl because he considers him to be the most deserving and is aware of his “extreme worthiness and humanity.”

## Notes

Congreve’s dedication is distinguished from the usual ones because it also constitutes a statement of purpose. Congreve outlines his aims as a writer and expresses his dissatisfaction with contemporary comedies while acknowledging his debt to the patronage of Ralph, the Earl of Montague. The dedication contains lavish praise of the earl, which was customary in the Restoration Age. Therefore, Congreve compares the society of the earl to that of Scipio and Lelius in classical times.

Congreve’s criticism of the contemporary dramatic scene is relevant to *The Way of the World*. He blames certain misinterpretations of his work on the poor taste of the audience, accustomed to ridiculing characters who are fools. Congreve states that in his view such characters are limited; they are incapable of moving the audience to compassion and can only provoke coarse laughter. Congreve distinguishes his characters from those depicted in contemporary comedies. The main point of difference lies in the fact that his characters invite ridicule not for their natural follies, but for the exposure of their affectation. Unfortunately, he feels that not many viewers possess the ability to distinguish correctly between these different types. This distinction forms the basis of the characterization in the play. While Mirabell is a Truewit, Fainall, Witwoud and Petulant are the False Wits. But not all the characters in *The Way of the World* are examples of affectation. Some, like Lady Wishfort and Sir Wilfull Witwoud, are Jonsonian “humors” (characters with one distinctive feature or quality which motivates them). Congreve also depicts the conventional fops and country bumpkins, frequent objects of ridicule in Restoration comedies.

## PROLOGUE

### Summary

In the prologue, or the introduction to the play, Congreve categorizes poets as those who fare the worst among Nature’s fools, for Fortune first grants them fame and then “forsakes” them. Congreve laments this unfair treatment meted out to the poets, who are Fortune’s own offspring. Poets have to risk the fame earned from their previous work when they write a new work. If his new endeavor fails, the poet must lose his seat in Parnassus. (Parnassus was a mountain near Delphi in Greece, sacred to Apollo and the Muses. Apollo was the sun-god and patron of the arts, while the Muses were the nine goddesses of the arts. Parnassus was regarded as the seat of learning, poetry and the arts.)

Congreve states that although he has worked hard to write this play, if the audience does not like it, they should not spare him for his trouble but damn him all the more. He tells the audience not to pity him for his stupidity. He promises that he will blame the audience if they heckle any scene. He proceeds to state that his play has “some plot,” “some new thought,” “some humor” -- but “no farce.” This is regarded as a fault by some. He comments wryly that the audience should not expect satire since they have nothing for which to be reproached. Nobody can dare to correct them. His sole aim has been to “please” and not to “instruct,” since this might offend the audience. If he should accidentally expose a knave or a fool, his audience will not be hurt, as there are no knaves or fools among them. He takes the role of a passive poet who has left everything to the judgment of the audience. He bids the audience to “save or damn” him according to their own discretion.

## Notes

A prologue was a convention of the plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is normally written in verse and states the writer's aim and theme. It is usually spoken by one of the characters. This prologue was delivered by the actor who played the part of Fainall.

Congreve was among the rare group of writers who possessed the ability to stand back and objectively reflect on their work. His prologue is therefore not a mere convention but expresses some important points. Although Congreve describes the unfortunate condition of poets, the prologue is not remorseful in tone. Rather, Congreve urges the audience to "save or damn" him according to their own discretion and judgment. He knows that he cannot rely on his past good fortune and that he is risking everything on this new venture. He promises that he will not resent it if the audience judges his work harshly.

In truth, Congreve was extremely bitter about the poor response towards this play when it first appeared. His remark in the dedication about the poor taste of the multitudes who favor the "coarsest strokes of Plautus" to the purity of Terence's style is an indication of his resentment. Some critics have suggested that Congreve did not write any other plays after *The Way of the World* because he was so disheartened by its failure.

Congreve states that plot, new thought and humor are the ingredients of his play. He emphasizes that he has not included farce (satirical comedy that usually involves farfetched plot turns). Many people in his time considered this exclusion to be a fault. He ironically tells the audience not to expect satire, since nobody can dare to correct such a reformed society. (Satire is typically employed by an author to expose human vice.) However, satire abounds in *The Way of the World*. Congreve criticizes false wit or affectation through the characters of Fainall, Witwoud, and Petulant, exposes the knavery of Fainall and .....Mrs

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Congreve has created a whole gallery of characters in *The Way of the World*. The world of his play is peopled with fops, fools, coxcombs, mistresses, lovers, villains, country bumpkins, wits, and would-be wits. Yet *The Way of the World* has often been criticized for its presentation of a thin and superficial life. It should be kept in mind, however, that Congreve's play is not a naturalistic reflection of the society in which he lived. It is a realistic description only of a narrow spectrum of Restoration society, with little concern about the everyday world outside his social range. Even within the "world" represented, Congreve focuses on the actions of Mirabell and how he finally acquires love and fortune.

Congreve's genius lies in his transformation of stock Restoration characters into .....

### THE LOVERS

**Mirabell** - Mirabell is the chief protagonist of the play and controls the action throughout. The main plot chronicles Mirabell's attempt to win Millamant, both for her beauty and her fortune. At first glance, Mirabell appears to be the typical Restoration beau, envied by the other characters for his wit and .....

**Millamant** - Millamant is the ideal comic heroine and a perfect match for Mirabell. At first glance she appears to be a very coquettish woman, who plays the role of the belle effortlessly. She has beauty, wit, intelligence, and vivaciousness. As a result, it is not surprising that she is surrounded by admirers. But beneath .....

Detailed analysis of many additional major characters is included in the complete study guide.

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

*The Way of the World* is written with an almost perfect neo-classical precision. The plot construction adheres to the four-part formula of protasis (exposition of characters and situation), epitasis (development of complications), catastasis (the climactic moment), and the catastrophe (the resolution of all the complications in the denouement). It also has a strong unity of time with the entire play taking place in a single day and a unity of action with the entire plot revolving around Mirabell. The only breach of classical principles is Congreve's deliberate violation of the unity of place. Act I is set in a fashionable chocolate-house to establish a sense of the artificial 'world' of the play. In Act II the setting shifts to St. James' Park, a fashionable Restoration setting. The setting is then shifted to the confines of a room in Lady Wishfort's house for the remaining three acts.

The compression of time in the play results in a crowding of events and lends rapidity to the action. Its drawback is that it rushes events so that they sometimes do not seem credible. For example, when....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

The main theme of the play is indicated by Congreve in the title, *The Way of the World*. The phrase reflects the unpleasant and sordid facts of life in the social world of the play. The play can, therefore, be seen as a representation of the possibilities of happiness that an individual can enjoy in the social world. Mirabell and Millamant wish to marry and to enjoy the six thousand pounds that she will get only if she marries with Lady Wishfort's consent.

The characters' lives are complicated by the way of the world. Mirabell has offended Lady Wishfort by his 'sham addresses,' and is opposed by Fainall and his mistress Mrs. Marwood. Fainall hopes to eliminate Millamant and have the six thousand pounds descend to Mrs. Fainall, through whom he .....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Critically comment on the social world depicted in *The Way of the World*. Does it conform to the actual world of Restoration society?
2. Analyze *The Way of the World* as a comedy of manners.
3. Comment on the complex plot structure of *The Way of the World* and give a short account of the events which have occurred before the beginning of the play.....

***END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS***

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