UNIT 3  THE WAY OF THE WORLD: THEMES

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will assist you to manoeuvre your way through The Way of the World by elaborating in detail the thematic aspects that Congreve has strategically embedded in the play. By drawing attention to the ideological politics of the play and understanding it through the prism of the socio-historical context of England, the intention is to foreground how generic compulsions and stultified stereotypes interact with the socio-political conditions of their time and imbue the narrative with a possibility of panoply of interpretations.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is important to keep in mind that these thematic concerns cannot be made sense of in a vacuum. In fact, the meaning-making of this play or any other literary text, is a complex process and is shaped by the positionality and ideological baggage of the readers. Keeping this framework in mind, this unit will dissect the different themes that exert their influence on the play in their own unique ways.

3.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The Way of the World is excessively preoccupied with property and wealth and retention of class privileges. The central protagonists believe that possession of property is a guiding factor to a physical well-being. The beginning of the play itself makes it evident that the protagonists - Mirabell and Millamant have resolved to commit themselves to each other and most of the plotline charts the trajectory of their attempts to ensure a materially comfortable life for themselves post their wedding. Overall, the play not only exhibits the dominant ideological impulses but also foregrounds the complexities of living in a society which simultaneously pokes fun at those values that the plotline eventually ends up upholding. Millamant's ironic self-awareness and Mirabell's gentle sarcasm bear testimony to the challenges of not only surviving but thriving in the beau monde that overvalues appearances and trifles, without themselves getting reduced to caricatures.
3.2.1 Class Politics

Lawrence Stone in his influential work "The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 - 1800," describes a shift in marriage and gender relations from an alliance that privileged interests of the family over the wishes of the individual. While every age has multiple ideologies contesting for supremacy, this historical transition is played out in the play that celebrates the reciprocal love of the protagonists who collaborate with each other to outwit figures of authority, here represented by Lady Wishfort. But it is significant to be cognisant of the fact that despite glorifying rebellious lovers, playwrights like Congreve had to manoeuvre between the theatrical value of subverting social conventions for comic relief and the desire to comfort the audience that privileges of the elite will be preserved through the sexual purity of potential wives (Markley 227). Millamant for all her provocative wit is sexually innocent and marrying her will ensure a life of leisure and comfort because of the wealth that she will bring to her husband. Eventually, patriarchy is going to be upheld. In fact, as the play reaches its closure, Mirabell becomes the agent who rescues the jeopardised reputation of Lady Wishfort's house and reconstructs the social arrangements to accommodate the socio-cultural transition of the contemporary times that demands self-discipline and social restraint. Restoration society's thrust upon social performances served the dual purposes of executing a societal sanctioned authority and delineating a lady or a gentleman in an era of social flux that triggered new found anxieties. As the critic, Kevin J Gardner, rightly says that, "Lady Wishfort's inability to see the servant's masquerade before us nearly obscures Congreve's point that, despite the evidence of successful imitation, the differences are visible to those who look closely - whether those differences matter to anyone except anxious patricians is another issue altogether. Because of their fear of social perpetrators, the patrician class tends to mock bourgeois affectation of grace or gentility as artificial or obviously mechanised while claiming that their own is built in so thoroughly that it has become second nature" (64-65). Like every institution that intends to survive the ravages of time, the patrician class was compelled by socio-political circumstances to introspect and temper their excesses in the wake of the rising bourgeois classes that were becoming significant stakeholders. Similarly, The Way of the World is a deeply political play that preserves the privileges of the elite but also foregrounds that aristocratic excesses and uncontrolled behaviour of the likes of Lady Wishfort that needs to be tempered by the likes of Mirabell who recognise the value of decorum, propriety and prudence. Let us now talk about the notion of love and marriage next.

3.2.2 Love and Marriage

The play celebrates the victory of Whig moderation over the excesses associated with the aristocracy during the heyday of the Restoration period. Playful bantering, subterfuges and other tricks eventually create a possibility for romantic transactions to bloom. Exaggerated displays of emotion and excessive expressions of love become cause for ridicule. Both the hero and the heroine refrain from sentimentality and constantly pepper their affection for each other with sarcasm and ironic wit lest they start resembling characters from overtly sentimental drama.

The heroine, Millamant, is eventually exempted from making hard choices - whether she should compromise romantic love for the sake of economic survival, as she is made financially independent by an inheritance. Choosing a partner solely motivated by economic needs is anything but romantic. Yet prudence demands that money matters cannot be entirely brushed under the carpet. The most suitable marriage would be the one where falling in love ensures financial security but
at the same time, the marriage should not be contracted ostensibly for money. Mirabell and Millamant are both well-versed with the way of the world and they are able to successfully navigate through the vicissitudes of life.

The novel concerns with marriage contracts and gender issues are manifested in the several "proviso" scenes in Restoration comedies where the young lovers negotiate the power dynamics in the relationship (Munns, 144). The contemporary ideal of the "companionate marriage" that celebrates mutual reciprocity and intellectual compatibility gave women some power to "choose," but by and large, the heroine's liberty was restricted to marriage with the husband of her choice. This becomes obvious in the romance and marriage of Millamant and Mirabell especially when Millamant becomes conscious of the fact that her love for Mirabell will subject her completely to his whims and fancies post marriage. Closer scrutiny makes it evident that the play celebrates a gendered discourse of romance that despite guaranteeing women some agency, seems to have very limited parameters for women's emancipation. For all the celebratory closure, the happy ending is reserved for Millamant, the conventionally charming wealthy virgin and her cousin, Mrs Fainall occupies the peripheries of this merry-making as given the rationale of the play, she pays the price for her sexual transgressions. On the contrary, Mirabell emerges absolutely unscathed from his affair with Mrs Fainall and in fact, gets to marry Millamant, the belle of the beau monde. The next sub section examines who could be called an ideal gentleman in the context of the age.

3.2.3 The ideal Gentleman post Glorious Revolution

Mirabell is not a quintessential Restoration rake who was notorious for his persuasive charm and breaking of female hearts. He has not abandoned his former mistress, Mrs Fainall, without safeguarding her future prospects. Mrs Fainall, is also not the typical embodiment of a scorned woman, in fact, she still considers Mirabell a good friend and assists him in wooing her cousin, Millamant, and outwitting her own mother, Lady Wishfort. Much of the action in the play is an outcome of Mirabell's careful strategising and scheming. He seems to have somewhat mastered the tightrope walk of balancing his personal aspirations and concern for others without retreating into villainy or becoming the typical sentimental hero. His character portrayal is to be understood as diametrically opposite to that of Fainall who is a brazen fortune-hunter and represents aggressive sensuality and bitter cynicism.

Mirabell personifies all the virtues that were considered necessary to merit the tag of an ideal gentleman of the times in which the play was situated and needs no moral rehabilitation before he can marry Millamant, the wealthy virgin who brings both physical and cultural capital to their union. Mirabell is not an aggressive libertine like the heroes who preceded him in the plays during Charles II's reign. His character portrayal is premised upon the ideals listed out by the courtesy books of his time. All the social graces that would render a gentleman accomplished in fashionable circles comprised of polite conversation and ability to charm women. The entire trajectory of the play successfully chronicles Mirabell's mastery of conversation and self-amused outlook on the functioning of his society. Given his finer sensibilities, his wit is good-humoured and has no appreciation for bawdiness. The polished and attractive persona of Mirabell is continuously corroborated by the fact that all the women in the play are in love with him. An accomplished gentleman was expected to be well-versed with the estate of the lady whom he wanted to marry; he was also urged to take into cognisance her virtues. Mirabell is sexually experienced but there is no
suggestion in the play that he will prove to be promiscuous post marriage. Though Mrs Fainall’s character development and eventual fate lend some pathos to the merry-making that occurs when the play reaches its closure, but given the ethos celebrated by the play and the social conventions of the Restoration period, there is neither any moral compulsion in the play nor does Mrs Fainall herself expect Mirabell to have married her (Gagen 422-27). The gentlemanly behaviour is also predicated upon a regulated and carefully monitored display of affections. While the play foregrounds Sir Wilful and Petulant indulging in stupid drunk behaviour, Mirabell has perfect control over his emotions, always. Similarly, Fainall for all his sophistry and intellect, often loses his temper and resorts to verbal and even physical aggression (when he points his sword at his wife) but we never encounter Mirabell losing his calm self-possession.

When Lady Wishfort gets acquainted with his daughter’s affair with Mirabell, she worries only about the reputation of her house and the moral weaknesses of her daughter that made her indulge in such transgressive sexual behaviour. She never holds Mirabell responsible for any indiscretion. In fact, the entire play bears testimony to the fact that in every situation Mirabell has acted according to the gentlemanly code of conduct. Given the ethical framework of the play, Mirabell is the gentleman par excellence without any moral lapses and embodies the virtues that were cherished by his spatio-temporal location.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) How is class politics in The Way of the World tied up with gender politics inextricably?

2) Why is Fainall not considered the ideal gentleman in the play?

3) What are the limitations of the companionate ideal of marriage?

4) What purpose does Mrs Fainall serve in the play?
3.2.4 The Subversion of Authority

So, while the Restoration period was initially welcomed as the beginning of political stability, it did not really live up to its promise and was often characterised by socio-cultural upheavals and dynastic uncertainty and chaos eventually culminating into the Glorious Revolution (1688) and establishment of the constitutional monarchy under William III and Mary II.

The Restoration comedies were increasingly preoccupied with a crisis of patrician authority mirroring the changing politico-social landscape of England. While aristocratic parents continued to determine the marriage partners of their children based on political and economic alliances, the vibrant young couple in the Restoration comedy mounted a strong opposition to them and generally worked out their own arrangement on the basis of romantic inclinations (Munns, 143-44).

In *The Way of the World*, which premiered in 1700, after the consolidation of constitutional monarchy and virtues of propriety, decorum and moderation, the crisis of social authority assumes a different form because power is wielded by a woman, Lady Wishfort. This play, like all Comedy of Manners plays, celebrates the youthful pursuits and romantic adventures of the energetic couple who rebel against patrician figures of authority for the sake of love. But Lady Wishfort's futile attempts to retain some modicum of power render her ridiculous not only because of her weakening social authority but also because of her ageing and decaying sexual charm. The maintenance of patrician hegemony was absolutely integral to the sustenance of the myth of social exclusivity that constituted the foundation of aristocracy especially given the contemporary times (Gardner 53-54). If one were to dig a bit deeper, it becomes clear that the young couple are often not interested in a complete overturning of the dominant socio-cultural set up but wish to stake a claim in that very culture by mounting opposition to the old generation and gradually sidelining them from positions of power (Gill 16). These tensions assume prominence throughout the play when Lady Wishfort's position is challenged by Mirabell who comes to represent a tempered form of patrician authority compared to the aristocratic excesses of the previous generation.

Many scholars have argued that Congreve's period was synonymous with Britain developing into a modern state be it economically, politically or culturally and this necessitated that the community which wielded power in society reform itself in accordance with the virtues that would prove to be handy given the ideological flux - cultivation of self-restraint and reliance on legal contracts. The erstwhile form of patrician authority that glorified absolutist wielding of power gets transplanted by a new form of patriarchal order inaugurated by Mirabell and in sync with the transforming ideological landscape of England in the wake of the Glorious Revolution.

3.2.5 Wit and Wordplay

The witty language of the Restoration theatre was its most defining trait and it also mirrored contemporary society's obsession with verbal sophistication. As the critic, Anthony Kaufman, rightly argues that "When Congreve declares that there is some difference between a true and false wit, he is calling our attention to the fact that his comedy is structured around a skilful counterpoint of voices - a medley that clearly reveals fools, true wits and men of deep and irrevocable malice" (411-12). In the universe of the play, the way in which a character deploys linguistic resources signals the presence or absence of wit. Possession of wit was considered a prized commodity in the fashionable high society that was completely obsessed with superficialities and appearances. Linguistic
refinement was believed to be symptomatic of an ironic self-awareness and intelligence that was a prerequisite for flourishing in Restoration society. In the play, the verbal sophistication of Mirabell and Millamant makes them stand out and helps them navigate the labyrinthine trails of their society. On the contrary, a self-conscious preoccupation with mastering words, transmutes an individual into a wit-manufacturing machine, as it happens in the case of Witwoud. His speech has lost all sense of spontaneity and appears to be visibly contrived. He becomes the most ridiculous embodiment of a society that is excessively preoccupied with appearances.

For Congreve, the deployment of wit is a prerequisite of the dramatic conventions of the Restoration period. But he does not celebrate verbal sophistication simply for its superficial charm. His larger concern coincides with Dryden's conceptualisation of wit. According to Dryden, the deployment of wit also entails a traditional notion of decorum ("a propriety of words and thoughts") whose theoretical foundation provides a barometer by which false wit can be measured. Similarly, if one delves a little deeper in the Dedication to The Way of the World, it becomes obvious that for Congreve, true wit means more than linguistic sophistication. He seems to compare and contrast "affected wit" and "natural folly" as a theme for comedy and differentiates between farcical comedy and a comedy in which affected wit is the driving engine for creating laughter. Going by this rationale, his false wits are not natural fools but people who have not been able to successfully cultivate a witty persona for themselves. Since propriety has become a barometer to assess wit, Sir Wilful's drunken address to Millamant becomes the most farcical case of affected wit where he ludicrously stitches together bits and pieces of fashionable polite talk. Similarly, Lady Wishfort's dialogues with Sir Rowland are also replete with misemployment of words, highlighting the discrepancy between her intention and the meaning of the words. It is easy to mistake Fainall for a true wit given his verbal virtuosity but his wit makes him a megalomaniac rather than help him cruise through his socio-cultural circumstances (Hinnant 374-79).

Amused irony coupled with a thorough understanding of the functioning of the world encapsulates the primary qualities of wit and endows the thematic universe of the play with a sustainable moral anchor. Mirabell and Millamant are capable of emotional profundity for all their polished demeanour, compared to Fainall who despite his linguistic mastery does not fulfill the requisite credentials of the kind of wit that is met with approval in the play because of his hard cynicism and aggressive outlook.

3.2.6 Schemes, Intrigues and Deceptions

To claim her share of property, Millamant is ready to play tricks on friends and relatives. Mirabell is himself involved as are his servants so as to assist Millamant in gaining access to her wealth. When Mrs Fainall, Mirabell's ex mistress had feared that her affair had left her pregnant, Mirabell had strategically arranged her marriage to Fainall to quell any scandalous rumours. It is like the erstwhile feudal wars that were fought on the battlegrounds have transmuted into social scheming in the drawing room and all the characters are fighting tooth and nail with words to retain some modicum of power in the societal politics. Money and romance are inextricably intertwined in the social scheme of the play and most of the characters seem to be more worried about reputation than with actual morality of the issue at hand.

The plot carefully engineered by Mirabell to embarrass Lady Wishfort by making her enter a mock marriage with his servant and then blackmailing her to release
Millamant's inheritance is met with a befitting counterplot by Mrs Marwood and Fainall who blackmail Lady Wishfort into handing over all the wealth under her name. As expected, Mirabell's ingenuity and resourcefulness helps him to triumph over all obstacles but it becomes clear that familiarity with the way of the world is a prerequisite to tackle the societal politics and negotiate one's position in a social space that is no less than a labyrinth. So while all characters scheme and try to manipulate the situation to their advantage, some like Mirabell and Millamant manage to retain the liveliness of their personalities and emotional depth and others like Mrs Marwood and Fainall degenerate into aggressive sensualists with no genuine emotions.

3.2.7 Comedy of Manners

Congreve has been dominantly considered to have popularised the literary genre of the Comedy of Manners and The Way of the World is a quintessential example of this. As a theatrical form, it is a social satire about the mannerisms of the beau monde. It usually has stock characters like a country bumpkin who is unable to fit in the witty city social circles, fops and older women who are having a hard time reconciling with their ageing body etc. The interrelated themes of gender, sexuality and marriage are played out in various permutations and combinations in Restoration drama. The Comedy of Manners is the perfect genre to explore these thematic concerns as it tries to foreground the definition of gender roles, sexual behaviour, class politics and the obsessive concern about striking a prudent marriage. Different kinds of courtships unfold over the course of the play in question, be it the emotionally restrained romance of Millamant and Mirabell or the ridiculous courtship of Sir Rowland and Lady Wishfort. Though often conservative in its closure, the comedy of manners charts out a new model of marriage based on intellectual compatibility. The possibility of unsavoury marital alliances serves as trigger points of the plot. The kind of discrepancy between the polished demeanour that people maintain with their public persona and their basic human appetite also, often evoke humour, for instance, Lady Wishfort's malapropisms. Social capitulations, romantic intrigues and cuckoldology also constitute the plotline.

However, it is not difficult to unearth the gendered discourses on romance in such Restoration comedies. Social vicissitudes such as the economically vulnerable position of women and conflicts of desire and virtue shape the play. A quintessential heroine of this genre would never let down her guard and would win over her lover with her calm self-possession. Her bantering might be provocative but sexually she will be innocent (Gill 198). Millamant might be very good at wielding the linguistic resources at her disposal but as far as carnal matters are concerned, she is a complete novice and her virginity confirms that. A typical hero of this genre would be notorious for his persuasive charm, witty repartees and resourcefulness. Mirabell embodies all these virtues along with all the social graces that render him very agreeable in his society. Their eventual marriage is premised upon a social order based on class affiliation and clearly defined gender roles.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Is the play attempting a radical challenge to figures of authority?
2) What does the continuous plotting and scheming in the play imply about the beau monde?

3) How is The Way of the World a quintessential comedy of manners?

4) What does linguistic refinement convey in the scheme of the play?

3.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has tried to engage with the important thematic aspects of The Way of the World by highlighting their socio-political relevance for the time frame in which the play is situated. A detailed analysis of how the plot closely revolves around class politics, gendered nature of romance, the deployment of wit and satire, the rising preoccupation with values associated with propriety, decorum and prudence, has been done. An attempt has been made to help you understand the reasons for the popularity of the play in the dominant western imagination even now and how Congreve is considered to have popularised the genre of comedy of manners that is still flourishing, 4 centuries after The Way of the World premiered in 1700.

3.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The exclusivity of class is dependent on social performance and most importantly, the blood purity of the lineage. To ensure the purity of the lineage, the bodies of aristocratic women were constantly under surveillance lest they engage in sexual encounters with men who do not hail from the so-called elite class and "pollute" their wombs. Millamant is the belle of the beau monde not only because of her charming persona but also because of her inheritance and virginity.

2. Given the changing parameters of the "hero" under the constitutional monarchy of William III and Mary II, the aggressive sensualist Fainall does not fulfil the requisite credentials. His rakish persona and lack of conventional morality would have made him the hero in the plays written during the heyday of the Restoration period. Although he shares a lot with Mirabell especially his wit and intelligence but lack emotional depth.
3. The companionate marriage still gave women some power to choose their husbands depending on intellectual compatibility and mutual attraction. But it was a very limited form of freedom as their identity was subsumed under that of their husbands and all the gender-related issues were reduced to the rhetoric of love. Increased emphasis on finding fulfilment through domestic bliss severely shut the possibilities of alternatives avenues of channelising one's potential. For instance, in the play, Millamant is very conscious that her life would become a living hell if Mirabell did not turn out to be a good husband.

4. Mrs Fainall's character portrayal bears testimony to the very restrictive avenues for women's fulfilment in the beau monde. Her affair with Mirabell had sealed her fate and reduced her status to that of a penitent woman who has no option but to reconcile with her fate. The play's happy ending has no place for the likes of Mrs Fainall and her presence works as a foil to Millamant who has been careful enough to keep her "virtue" intact.

Check Your Progress 2

1. No, not really. The play is supplanting the erstwhile absolutist values associated with patrician authority with relatively more flexible structures of power to accommodate the changing power dynamics of society in the wake of rising bourgeois. That is why the likes of Lady Wishfort need to be restrained by the likes of Mirabell who understand the power of law and contractual obligations.

2. The only way to derive fulfilment in the beau monde is to be constantly aware of the power one wields in a social space that explicitly functions on putting up of social performances. So given the tenuous nature of the position, the members of this strata of society often resort to tactics and strategies to maintain their place in a social zone that overvalues appearances where the worst thing to befall a person is a loss of reputation.


4. Linguistic refinement was considered a very important social skill to master in the Restoration society. The power to wield language conveyed a sense of sophistication and signalled possession of wit and an ironical self-awareness of society that were considered significant virtues to survive in it. However, an over conscious deployment of linguistic resources could transform one into a Witwoud who just mechanically blurs out witty repartees.

3.5 GLOSSARY

**Bourgeois ideology:** The social classes - professionals, manufacturers, merchants, that became influential during Industrial Revolution and whose concerns are primarily related to the preservation of their economic supremacy and "respectability" in society.

**Cultural Capital:** The possession of knowledge and behavioural skills that a person can foreground to signal one's social status.

**Ideological Politics:** Ideology implies a systematic set of beliefs and values that shape our perception of the world around us. Ideological politics mean organizing the thought process/ values/
moral concerns in a manner that they privilege certain socio-political and economic structures over others.

**Malapropism:** Misuse of words in a ridiculous manner.

**Panoply:** A wide spectrum.

**Patrilineal:** Determining descent through the male line.

**Patrician:** Aristocrat

**Stultified:** To render something ridiculous

**Trajectory:** Curve

**Transgressive:** A breach of conventional morality or violation of a law