

Block**3****WILLIAM CONGREVE: *THE WAY OF
THE WORLD***

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

William Congreve has been celebrated for popularising the comedy of manners and his most famous comedy - *The Way of the World*, continues to be an integral component of the English theatrical repertoire. In order to critically understand the significance of its popularity, we have to locate the play concretely in its socio-historical and political context.

The four units of this Block obviously do not constitute an exhaustive representation of all the critical interpretations of *The Way of the World*. But we have endeavoured to include discussions on the crucial aspects of the play so as to familiarise you with the playwright, the historical setting and the ideological politics of the play. We have also incorporated explanations of difficult words and concepts and complemented the analysis of the play with relevant question-answer exercises so that you can simultaneously check your understanding of the text. Please read the text *The Way of the World* by William Congreve

The Units are as follows:

Unit 1: William Congreve: Life and Works

Unit 2: *The Way of the World*: A Summary

Unit 3: *The Way of the World*: Themes

Unit 4: *The Way of the World*: Symbols, Allegories and Motifs

UNIT 1 WILLIAM CONGREVE: LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Details of William Congreve
- 1.3 Politico-historical Circumstances of 17th and 18th century England
- 1.4 William Congreve, His Works and the Restoration Play
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.7 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will endeavour to familiarise you with **William Congreve**, who has been celebrated by posterity as a member of the triumvirate of Restoration Comic dramatists along with **George Etherege** and **William Wycherley**.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will try and trace the trajectories of the socio-cultural and political developments that occurred in the 17th century in England and eventually culminated in the reinstatement of Charles II as the monarch and ushered in what is popularly called the "Restoration Period." Navigating through these societal and political developments will facilitate a much more informed understanding of Congreve's literary oeuvre and will make it possible to comprehend his plays, primarily, *The Way of the World* (premiered in 1700), as a deeply self-conscious and historically aware text that participates in some of the most interesting social debates of its time.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF WILLIAM CONGREVE

Congreve was born in Bardsey, Yorkshire on 24 January, 1670. His father was the second son of a Staffordshire squire who encountered numerous financial difficulties owing to his affiliation with the Tories during the civil war. Congreve's father was given a commission as a lieutenant in the Irish army and consequently, the family moved to Kilkenny where Congreve's father joined the Duke of Ormond's regiment. This facilitated Congreve's admission in Kilkenny College that, not only imparted him good overall education but also laid the foundation of his interest in classical languages and literature which would later fuel his reputation as one of the wittiest men in his contemporary literary circles. He later joined Trinity College in Dublin in 1686 but the college started encountering many difficulties owing to King James II's accession to the throne. As a consequence of political difficulties, the college shut down for some time and Congreve's father got him enrolled as a law student in the Middle Temple. Legal studies did not really excite him. Literary pursuits caught his fancy and he started frequenting the circle of wits and writers who congregated at Will's Coffee House where he also befriended the well-established writer - John Dryden and gradually carved

a niche for himself in the fashionable literary circuits of his time (Thomas 2-3). Let us now look at the politico- historical circumstances of the 17th and the 18th century England next.

1.3 POLITICO - HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND

Congreve lived through the transitional times of the 17th century when England was divided into the ideological camps of the Whigs and the Tories. He himself supported the Whigs and their vision of an ordered, stable society and his plays often represent the political clashes of their time. The main issue of contention revolved around matters of governance and the nature of rights and privileges of the monarchs and the people. Charles I increasingly favoured a vision of divinely sanctioned monarchy that earned him a lot of criticism from the people who supported a constitutional parliamentary form of monarchy. Even though the Parliament of England did not enjoy a lot of power as far as governance was concerned, but over the centuries it had become an important political force which could not be simply brushed aside by the monarch, especially because of its ability to raise taxes. Charles I did not call on the Parliament for 11 years. To manage his finances, he tried to make peace with England's traditional rivals - France and Spain. To raise money, he imposed many fines and taxes. His marriage to the Catholic French Priestess also raised eyebrows, (again, we need to recall what we studied in Block I, Unit I of BEGC 107 when we were talking about 17th century England). Moreover, he introduced many ceremonial forms of worship into the Church and incurred the wrath of the Protestants who accused him of favouring Catholicism. Indignation against his policies kept on increasing and translated into a series of armed conflicts and political manoeuvring between the Parliamentarians (Round heads) and the Royalists (Cavaliers). The war ended with the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649, the exile of his son, Charles II, the establishment of the Protectorate under the rule of Oliver Cromwell from 1653 to 1658 and then his son, Richard Cromwell from 1658 to 1659. Richard Cromwell did not have the confidence of the army and soon a faction of the army removed him and England plunged into a political chaos. In 1660, Charles II returned from the exile - this was the beginning of the Restoration Period.

The Restoration Period espoused an ideology of libertinism which was primarily a 17th century version of classical Epicurean hedonism. For the libertines, the senses were the most important sources of cognition and emphasised the material world over the illusory promises of ideals. They celebrated free indulgence of appetites, and a new kind of self-fashioning assumed great prominence in 17th century England. What used to be condemned by conventional morality - adultery, gambling, instant gratification of senses, became flamboyant pursuits. Since Charles II himself was the biggest endorser of this ideology, it also went on to imply a certain loyalty to the monarch and therefore, monarchy. Libertinism became an upper-class ideology and in the context of the Restoration, it also became an ideological tool to critique Puritanism that was dominantly associated with the Cromwellian reign (Staves 20-21). After the Restoration of Charles II, a wave of sympathy for the Royalists seized the politico-social landscape of England and this was very evident in the plays of Etherege, Wycherley, Dryden and *Aphra Behn*. However, it would be a very simplistic analysis to view these plays as mere royalist propaganda as they also often foregrounded the contradictions of society. Even the royalist had their own share of differences especially over the ideas propounded by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (Thomas 28). In his most

influential piece of writing, *Leviathan* (1651), he propounded that human beings in their natural state, stripped from their civilised veneer, are only motivated by the gratification of appetites and are constantly engaged in a ceaseless struggle for power and supremacy. His ideas stirred quite a controversy as they were diametrically opposed to the accepted Christian notion of man as being created after the image of God. His amoral conceptualisation of human beings necessitated that the only manner to achieve some modicum of amicability and civility was to invest power in a sovereign entity. The mutually agreed upon sovereign body being the only way to create a stable and ordered society.

However, all was not hunky dory with Charles' monarchy either. His open endorsement of promiscuity and a lavish lifestyle made many of his own supporters uncomfortable. His marriage to Catherine of Braganza was unpopular and they were childless. The 1665 Plague and the Great Fire of London (1666) were also seen as divine rebukes for Royal sins. So though, initially hailed as the beginning of political stability, the Restoration period was again characterised by dynastic uncertainty (Hughes 129-133).

Thus, the debates about efficient governance continued even after Charles II was restored to monarchy in 1660. As a consequence, the political thinkers and philosophers tried to provide some kind of foundation to grapple with the ideological battles. A major Whig political thinker who left a deep impression on the age was John Locke. Locke argued that the relationship between the governed and the government should be premised upon a contract reached through mutual consent. Obviously, given the larger political repercussions of Hobbes' ideas, royalists were opposed to the Hobbesian model of governance. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Hobbes' arguments on absolute authority did not enjoy much fervour especially in the wake of the recent political debacles. King James II resorted to absolute authority to defend and propagate his rule as well as the Catholic faith and the Parliament came to be suspended and the rule of statute law was revoked. The birth of a son to King James further strengthened the fears of a Catholic regime. Amidst all this politico-social chaos, William of Orange, the husband of King James' Protestant daughter, Mary, was invited by many English noblemen to protect the hereditary rights of his wife. William's political overtures proved popular and a lot of people supported his cause leading King James to flee the country without even fighting a battle. On reaching England, William was invited by the Whigs and the Tories to preside over a Convention Parliament on 22nd January 1689 which concluded that the arbitrary exercise of power by King James had resulted in a breaching of the contract between the King and the people and thus, paved the way for William and Mary to jointly assume charge of the throne but their powers would be checked by the Bill of Rights. A number of High Tories continued to vehemently oppose the disposing off of King James, but by and large the Glorious Revolution brought with it a promise of stability (Thomas 31- 33).

This newly reinstated political arrangement was provided a philosophical grounding in John Locke's anonymously published work - *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) where he argued that the notion of government is primarily driven by the consent of the people who choose to enter a contract with those in positions of authority. The people vow to abide by most of the decisions of government in lieu of protection of their freedom and property. Locke's repeated emphasis on property and money tied his interests with those of the emergent merchant-class who eventually went on to become significant stakeholders in these contractual obligations. The Lockean notion of contract theory became a very

important political concept and also exercised a lot of influence on Congreve's thought-processes. Like Locke, Congreve admitted that the world is not ideal and human beings are not perfect but an effective and practical social arrangement can be worked out by making contracts and thereby, enabling a habitable social existence. He attacked the typical Hobbesian concept of characters driven only by the satiation of coarse appetites but foregrounds how property and money can be deployed as a means to social and mental well-being and entering into mutually agreed upon contracts constitute the basis of a civilised society (Thomas 33).

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Give the biographical details of Congreve's life.
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- 2) What do you think were the most intense political debates of 17th century England?
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- 3) Who were the two philosophers who influenced the socio-cultural and political conceptualisations in the 17th century?
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- 4) What do you understand by the Restoration Period? Give some of its characteristics.
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1.4 WILLIAM CONGREVE, HIS WORKS AND THE RESTORATION PLAY

We shall now begin by examining William Congreve's life and works in this section. Though Congreve's literary output takes shape during the rule of William and Mary but his plays are considered to belong to the repertoire of the Restoration literature because the theatres for which he wrote were the ones established during the 1660s. For instance, Wren's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Duke's playhouse at Dorset Garden were still popular places for stage productions. Since the stage conventions were also dictated by theatrical structures, Congreve's plays are somewhat rooted in Restoration stage conventions - be it the obvious

divide between a forestage and scenic stage or the painted shutters signifying the interiors of the bedrooms (Thomas 39). However, as English society was located on the cusp of a change, the demographic of the audience underwent a shift which triggered a demand for a new kind of theatrical experience. The erstwhile court-based theatre of the Restoration that catered to the leisure of the upper echelons of society was now getting commercialised and grappling to accommodate a flurry of palettes especially those with a craving for sentimental comedies and farces.

The Restoration comedy had emerged as a recognisable genre in the 1660s. The comic legacies of Jacobean and Caroline drama gave it a robust foundation while the French influence, specifically that of Moliere, gave it the finesse. Sir George Etherege exercised a significant role in consolidating Restoration comedy as a genre with his first two plays - *Love in a Tub* (1664) and *She wou'd if she cou'd* (1668). In both these plays, the English and French comic tropes were carefully woven in the fabric of the narrative. John Dryden's *The Wild Gallant* (1663) was chiefly responsible for creating the quintessential rakish protagonist that went on to become synonymous with Restoration comedies. Another striking feature of Restoration drama during its heyday was the disparity it foregrounded between the expected polished behaviour and the Dionysian excesses to which the characters would eventually succumb (Thomas 16-17).

In 1691, Congreve published a short novel called *Incognita*. By 1695, Congreve had consolidated his reputation as a poet and a dramatist to be reckoned with, especially with the successful reception of *Love for Love* and the publication of the pastoral poem "The Mourning Muse of Alexis" which bemoaned the loss of Queen Mary. This period in his life was also coterminous with the political rewards that were bestowed upon him for his loyalty to the Whig bandwagon. Congreve was made a Commissioner for Hackney Coaches and the pro-Whig ministers of William III expected him to deploy his literary talent for the advancement of their cause. Congreve reciprocated by publishing a Pindarique Ode humbly offer'd to the King, on taking Namure, shortly afterwards which heaped lavish praise on William III. Congreve was not a very simplistic Whig loyalist, determined to write comedies characterised by emotional excesses that would eventually go on to populate the 18th century stage. His ideological attitude towards both life and playwriting strove to strike a balance between the fashionable nonchalance that was typical of Restoration literature and the emotional ardour of the 18th century. Owing to the civil war, the Restoration Period witnessed a decline in harping about sentimentality and instead stressed more on the form of the literary piece. Hobbes' "Answer to Davenant's Preface to Gondibert" had already stated the primacy of form in the aesthetic theory which according to him provided the structure whereas, the imagination only served an ornamental purpose. This means that the pattern is supreme. Congreve also followed this affiliation to judgement and reason and treated them as prerequisites to the creative process. The plotlines of his plays are carefully refined and regulated as the characters indulge in their intrigues and wordplays. While there are certainly echoes of earlier Restoration comedies but there is a drastic change in tenor. His heroes are not completely under the sway of their appetites but are refined people who have mastered the task of transmuting their cravings into sophisticated pursuits. Congreve tries to smooth the rough edges of the earlier comedies and delves deeper into understanding the intricacies of human behaviour. As Thomas states, a kind of restraint that his protagonists exhibit in their social negotiations go on to become the characteristic feature of his late comedies (Thomas 4-17).

Congreve's literary oeuvre can be studied as an attempt to transmute the inevitabilities of life into a pleasing pattern with a semblance of harmony and coherence. The Company at Lincoln's Inn Fields in London premiered William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. The play did not receive immediate success but posterity has bestowed the honour on Congreve by making him a member of the triumvirate of Restoration Comic dramatists with Sir George Etherege and William Wycherley. The socio-cultural climate after the Glorious Revolution was not favourably predisposed to the reception of plays as William and Mary did not provide the royal patronage that was granted under the regime of Charles II. Reformists groups like the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge further maligned the image of the theatres. *Robert D Hume* argues that all these incidents point to the "cultural marginalisation" of theatre (508). The hindrances faced by Congreve in appealing to the preferences of the audience are mirrored in the prologue to *The Way of the World*.

Congreve's plays foreground the ethos of the changing socio-cultural and political landscape of England in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution (1688) in which the monarchy of James II was supplanted by William III of Orange. The post-revolution England underwent phenomenal transitions and encountered new challenges. In the wake of the establishment of constitutional monarchy, the *Bill of Rights* granted a sense of harmony and structure to English society. The merchant classes were emerging as a significant social group with rising clout. Since they negotiated regularly with the material realities of money and property, a new set of values associated with contractual obligations instead of hereditary benefits started assuming cultural prominence. Aggrandisement of personal wealth accompanied by a careful investment in practical considerations dictated their thought process. The comedies of Congreve encapsulate these concerns about money and tangible assets. The Glorious Revolution as a whole celebrated the victory of middle-class value systems. As a consequence, Societies for the Reformation of Manners were established in 1690s and women often actively participated in them. Women also led campaigns to cleanse the playhouses of the lewdness and profanity that had apparently become staple ingredients of Restoration theatre. After the High Tory Churchman, Jeremy Collier, published his scathing indictment of the Restoration stage, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, a lot of actors were prosecuted for their supposed obscene performances. Given his Jacobite inclination, Collier was a very peculiar champion for the puritanical tastes that were becoming fashionable under William III. But he desperately needed some avenue to resuscitate his image given his very obvious opposition to William III. His *Short View* struck the right chord with the masses and with William III for upholding the puritan middle-class sensibilities who wanted to reform the theatre in keeping with their value systems (David Thomas 21-22).

To counter Collier, Congreve published a critique titled *Amendments of Mr Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (1698), and provided reasons for assessing and understanding comedy. Following Aristotle, he argued that the purpose of the genre of comedy is to instruct and delight and therefore, there is no scope to represent the idealistic characters as demanded by Collier. Secondly, he argues that the playwright's perspective should not be seen as those of his characters as they emerge in the context of the narrative. Thirdly, he highlights the importance of comprehending the context of the comic dialogue and what purpose is served by that in the overall scheme of the play. Lastly, he refutes the allegations of profanity by contending that there is no deliberate mockery of the Divine, on the contrary the satire is on the person who swears (Thomas 51-54).

Congreve seems to have a nuanced understanding of the comic tropes and how they function in the narrative to render it comprehensible to the audience. He places a lot of thrust on the significance of the context repeatedly, to understand the full import of the text and given the performative nature, the meaning can be fully derived from an interaction between all the stakeholders - authors, actors and the audience.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a discussion of Congreve's biographical circumstances and how he manoeuvred through them to carve a niche for himself in the world of writing. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to co-relate the specific circumstances of Congreve's life to those of the historical and political upheaval of 17th Century England that would enable us to understand the larger context of the changing aesthetics of drama. We have tried to demonstrate that aesthetics is not ideologically neutral but inextricably intertwined with the politics of the play. This leads to an understanding of the significance of change in Congreve's plays vis-a-vis the playwrights who wrote during the heyday of the Restoration period, and its ramifications for representation of social issues.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Describe the features of a typical comedy during the heyday of the Restoration Period.

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- 2) How did the comic tropes change under the regime of William and Mary?

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- 3) How did Congreve negotiate with his socio-cultural milieu?

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- 4) How does Congreve theorise comedy?

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- 5) Compare and contrast the value systems in Charles II's reign and William and Mary's reign.

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1.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Born in 1670, after the restoration of Charles II to monarchy. Father encountered difficulties due to his affiliation to the Tories during the Civil war. Congreve studied in Kilkenny College that not only imparted him good overall education but also laid the foundation of his interest in classical language and literature. He lived through the transitional times of the 17th century when England was divided into the ideological camps of Whigs and Tories.
2. England was divided into the ideological camps of Whigs and Tories. Anger and dissatisfaction against the unilateral policies of Charles I triggered a series of armed conflicts and political manoeuvring between Parliamentarians (Round heads) and Royalists (Cavaliers). The war ended with the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649, the exile of his son, Charles II, the establishment of the Protectorate under the rule of Oliver Cromwell from 1653 to 1658 and then his son, Richard Cromwell from 1658 to 1659 and the eventual reinstatement of Charles II to the throne in 1660. The debates about good governance continued to haunt England even during Charles II's regime especially after it became obvious that he does not have an heir and his pro-Catholic brother, James would succeed him. Sensing the increasingly hostile climate, James fled away and the political developments eventually paved the way for the Glorious Revolution.
3. Thomas Hobbes - His amoral conceptualisation of human beings argued that the only way to lead a "civilized" life necessitates that we invest power in a sovereign entity. The mutually agreed upon sovereign body is the only way to create a stable and ordered society. John Locke - He argued in *Two Treatises of Government*, that the notion of government is primarily motivated by the consent of the people who voluntarily enter a contract with those in positions of authority. The people vow to abide by most of the decisions of government in exchange of protection of their freedom and property. According to Locke, this constitutes the basis of a civilised society.
4. Charles II's return from exile and taking charge of the throne in England in 1660 is called the beginning of the Restoration Period. Libertine rhetoric became fashionable. Sexual promiscuity and frowning upon conventional morality. Critique of Puritanism associated with Cromwell's regime. Pro-royalist propaganda.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Restoration comedy is characterised by sexual excesses. A quintessential rake-hero is notorious for his persuasive charm and breaking hearts. It tries to explore the definition of gender roles, sexual behaviour, class politics and the concern about striking a prudent marriage. Disparity between the expected cultivated behaviour and the Dionysian excesses to which the characters would eventually succumb.

2. The sexual promiscuity that was considered flamboyant in the plays written during Charles II's regime underwent a shift. A typical rake who was completely under the sway of appetites was modified. The ideological attitude towards both life and playwriting strove to strike a balance between the fashionable nonchalance that was typical of the Restoration literature and the emotional ardour of the 18th century. As the merchant classes were emerging as a significant social group with rising clout, a new set of values associated with contractual obligations instead of hereditary benefits started assuming cultural prominence.
3. The socio-political environment after the Glorious Revolution changed drastically as William and Mary did not provide the royal patronage to the drama that was granted under the regime of Charles II. Reforming groups like the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge further maligned the image of the theatres. The obstacles faced by Congreve in appealing to the preferences of the audience are mirrored in the prologue to *The Way of the World*. Congreve polishes the rough edges of earlier comedies and delves into understanding the intricacies of human behaviour. A kind of restraint that his protagonists exhibit in their social negotiations goes on to become the characteristic feature of his late comedies. He tried to strike a balance between the flamboyant indifference that was typical of the Restoration literature and the emotional excesses of the 18th century.
4. In an Aristotelian vein, Congreve argues that the purpose of the genre of comedy is to instruct and delight. There is no space for idealism per se in a comedy. He places a lot of thrust on the context of the comic situation and its performative nature.
5. The Glorious Revolution as a whole celebrated the triumph of the middle-class value systems as opposed to the flamboyant past times of the social elite during Charles II's reign. Consequently, Societies for the Reformation of Manners were established in 1690s to cleanse the playhouses of the lewdness and profanity that had apparently become staple ingredients of the Restoration theatre. Mounting a direct challenge to the ideology fashionable during Charles II's reign, a new set of values associated with contractual obligations instead of hereditary privileges started gaining significance.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Aggrandizement: increase in size, expansion.

Catholics and Protestants: Catholics and Protestants have a somewhat different understanding of the function of the church. The word "Catholic" implies universal in extent and the Catholic Church perceives itself as the only true church in this world, under the aegis of the Pope. On the contrary, the Protestant Churches which came into existence after the Reformation movement in Europe in the 16th century (after Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church on October 31, 1517), do not constitute one united Church and there are many different denominations prevalent across the world. The Catholics tend to privilege the supremacy of the pope and stress on Mary,

Dionysian:

the mother of Jesus. They also believe in acknowledgement of specific saints, confession of sins to an earthly mediator and rituals and ceremonies. Whereas the Protestants regard the Bible as the only source of authority for Christian belief. They also believe that grace can only be bestowed upon human beings by God and is the only way to attain salvation. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and people and no human being deserves to be worshipped.

Dionysius was the Greek god of wine, fertility and celebration. Dionysian implies qualities associated with spontaneity, irrationality, rejection of discipline and conventions.

Echelon:

level or rank

Epicurean Hedonism:

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher (around 370 BC) who founded a school of thought that declared pleasure and avoidance of pain to be the sole aims of leading a good life. However, the 17th century interpretation of this doctrine in the Restoration Period is very different from its original concept.

Farce:

It is a literary genre that deploys highly exaggerated situations and ludicrous one-dimensional character to entertain the audience and make them laugh.

Jacobite:

This implies lending support to the dislodged James II and his descendants in their claim to the British throne after the Glorious Revolution (1688).

John Locke:

He was one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the 17th century.

Libertinism:

a worldview that practises an excessive disregard of conventionally accepted moral principles especially in matters of sexuality.

Material World:

This basically refers to the physical world we inhabit whereby our sensory faculties - sense of sight, touch, smell, taste, sound are able to grasp the tangible realities that surround us. The material world is to be contrasted with the ideal world that cannot be apprehended by our sensory faculties but is supposed to exist in a higher spiritual realm.

Puritanism:

It constitutes the belief system of a group of English Protestants of the late 16th and 17th centuries who held the Reformation of the Church under Elizabeth I as incomplete and strove to further "purify" forms of worship. Their values are characterized by a spirit of moralistic fervour and deprivation of sensory pleasures.

Whig and Tory:

'Whig' and 'Tory' were members of two opposing political factions in England, particularly during

the 18th century and the terms had assumed a lot of currency since the volatile conflict over the bill to exclude James, duke of York (afterward James II), from the succession. The nomenclature 'Whigs' came to imply Scottish Presbyterians and connoted nonconformity and rebellion and was applied to those who asserted their right to exclude the heir from the throne. 'Tory' was an Irish term implying a papist outlaw and was applied to those who endorsed the hereditary right of James despite his Roman Catholic faith.

Thomas Hobbes:

An English philosopher who is considered to be one of the founders of modern political philosophy.

Triumvirate:

A set of three.

Nonchalance:

This implies indifference and lack of concern.



UNIT 2 *THE WAY OF THE WORLD: A* SUMMARY

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Summary
 - 2.2.1 Epigraph
 - 2.2.2 Dedication
 - 2.2.3 Prologue
 - 2.2.4 Act I
 - 2.2.5 Act II
 - 2.2.6 Act III
 - 2.2.7 Act IV
 - 2.2.8 Act V
 - 2.2.9 Epilogue
- 2.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 2.5 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the significance of William Congreve's *The Way of the World* in the English literary canon by critically locating it in the historical moment of production, dissemination and reception. Though the play did not receive immediate success, it has become a permanent presence in the theatrical repertory. An attempt would be made to understand the performative context of the play especially given the fact that Congreve is dominantly believed to have popularised a new literary genre called the "Comedy of Manners."

2.1 INTRODUCTION

For Congreve, as for his most memorable dramatic protagonist, Mirabell, striking a balance and not giving into excesses becomes an underlying feature of their worldview which is also symptomatic of the changed politico-social ethos under the constitutional monarchy of William III and Mary II who champion Whig moderation and middle-class values associated with perseverance and the Protestant work ethic. Consequently, the trajectory of Mirabell's and Millamant's romance will be traced keeping in mind this fact, along with paying attention the scheme of things in the play. The operation of desire is interwoven with assurances of financial stability and the two concerns will intersect in an ideal marriage. Thus, we have provided a summary and an analysis of the five acts with an intention of closely reading them so that we become equipped with the requisite textual framework to connect the inside world of the text to the extra-textual sources. Let us begin by summarising the play, but please note that this summary is not in lieu of reading the original play.

2.2 SUMMARY

Congreve precedes the play with two quotations from Horace's second satire.

These translate into English as "You who seek retribution against adulterers will be happy to learn that they are impeded on all sides" and "[She is] afraid for the dowry."

2.2.1 Epigraph

These two quotations set the mood for the play that is going to deal with the protagonists who will indulge in Machiavellian politics in the beau monde for the sake of romance, power and money. By quoting from an already revered writer, Horace, Congreve is also trying to locate his work in an already established literary tradition. The dedication shall be discussed next.

2.2.2 Dedication

Following the conventions of his time, Congreve starts the play by preceding it with a dedication full of effusive praise for "the Right Honourable Ralph, Earl of Montague, Etc." In this cleverly worded letter, Congreve also expresses his dismay about the fact that the audience was not favourably predisposed towards his play and mocks them for lacking the discernment that according to him is a prerequisite for appreciating a satirical comedy. Congreve has often been hailed as the pioneer of the "Comedy of Manners" which is dominantly understood to be a genre where "affectation" is the biggest social flaw rather than a natural folly. Consequently, he also tries to elucidate the difference between comic characters which embody "affectations" and "humours" and argues that he has tried to strike a balance lest his comedy starts resembling a farce and in a pompously humble manner, indirectly traces his lineage to that of Aristotle whom he calls "the greatest judge of poetry." Let us look now at the Prologue.

2.2.3 Prologue

In an ironical vein, Congreve again continues to poke fun at his audience for not being witty enough to understand his play. The satire is also directed at the self-proclaimed morality bandwagon had assumed a lot of cultural prominence under the rule of William III and Mary II and were continuously targeting drama for supposedly corrupting society with its lewdness and subversive wit. Since the very function of satire is social correction with entertainment, Congreve proclaims in a mocking tone that his contemporary society is already reformed and needs no change. Moreover, he also highlights the difficulty in pleasing an audience that is so quick to take offense and cannot take a joke in a light-hearted manner. Having discussed the beginning let's begin straightaway with a summary of Act I next, followed by its analysis.

2.2.4 Act I

Summary

The very opening scene takes place in the chocolate-house and foregrounds Mirabell's defeat at the hands of Fainall in a card game. Soon, it becomes obvious that Mirabell is very fond of Millamant, niece of Lady Wishfort. Even though he is well aware of what he considers as faults in her personality. The conversation further highlights that Lady Wishfort dislikes Mirabell because at one point of time, he feigned affection for her in order to disguise his feelings for her niece. Lady Wishfort's ego is offended when she becomes acquainted with the truth. Lady Wishfort holds half of Millamant's inheritance and her consent becomes very important for her marriage to Mirabell. Soon a servant informs Mirabel that his valet has got married and it becomes evident that Mirabell is plotting some intrigue but its full import is not made clear in this act. Two gentlemen named

Witwoud and Petulant make an entrance and it is foregrounded that both of them have taken a fancy to Millamant but only because she is the current cynosure in their social circle. Even Witwoud's elder brother, Sir Willful, is expected to join them in a short while because he too wishes to court Millamant. We are also made aware of the fact that Mirabell's uncle will court Lady Wishfort and after giving away all these details, these men depart for a promenade.

Analysis

The first act does not reveal too many details but leaves the readers/audience with vague ideas about social intrigues and conspiracies that will constitute the play and will unfold in the subsequent acts. A palpable sense of hostility seems to hover between Fainall and Mirabell. Fainall doubts the nature of relationship between Mirabell and his wife, Mrs. Fainall, before their wedding. Moreover, he has good reason to believe that his mistress, Mrs. Marwood harbours a secret passion for Mirabell. Similarly, Mirabell is not entirely unaware of these suspicions and in fact, believes that Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress.

Even though the conventions of his time forbid Mirabell from writing panegyrics for his beloved, his love for Millamant is carefully concealed in the continuous witty bantering. Witwoud and Petulant are the stock fops and false wits that populated restoration comedies and lack a discriminating ability. While Witwoud is the false wit, Petulant is ridiculous in his hyperbolic gestures about always being desired by others. These flaws give a sneak peek into the various attributes that could be considered as causes for ridicule in Restoration Society. Witwoud and Petulant do not serve a major function in the play except to highlight the wittiness of Mirabell, the ideal gentleman in the social scheme of the play.

2.2.5 Act II

Summary

Now the action shifts to St. James Park, where Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood are immersed deeply in a conversation about men and how to wield power over them. Though they try to maintain the facade of friendliness but the cracks also become obvious when they discuss Mirabell. Mrs Fainall has a suspicion that Mrs Marwood has feelings for Mirabell. When Fainall and Mirabell make an entrance, Mirabell and Mrs Fainall exit, leaving Fainall and Mrs Marwood. We are now officially made privy to the information that Mrs Marwood is the mistress of Fainall and he only married his wife so as to be able to sustain his relationship with Mrs Marwood financially. As it is evident, Mrs Marwood and Fainall's relationship suffers from a lack of mutual respect and trust. In fact, Fainall can see through the fact that Mrs Marwood's feigned antagonism for Mirabell is actually love in disguise. Their verbal altercation comes to an end when Mrs Fainall and Mirabell come back. The conversation between Mrs Fainall and Mirabell reveals that they have been lovers in the past when she had been a widow, in fact, her marriage to Fainall was contracted to cover up the affair and a pregnancy scare. Mirabell also tells Mrs Fainall about his schemes to trick her mother, Lady Wishfort and eventually marry Millamant. He has arranged for his valet, Waitwell to pretend to be his uncle and take the name of Sir Rowland and court Lady Wishfort. But since Mirabell does not completely trust his valet and is worried that he might actually marry Lady Wishfort, he has got him married beforehand to Foible (Lady Wishfort's maid). Mirabell's intention is to embarrass Lady Wishfort by making her enter a mock-marriage contract with his valet pretending to be a wealthy man and then blackmailing her into releasing Millamant's fortune. Now the much talked about heroine, Millamant makes her first appearance in the play. She

seems quite self-aware about the power she wields over Mirabell. Though she is witty and seemingly emotionally distanced but it becomes quite blatant that she reciprocates Mirabell's love and is willing to go along with his plan to trick her aunt, Lady Wishfort. Mirabell believes that as Sir Rowland, Waitwell would make a suitable match for Lady Wishfort; plus the marriage would enable her to avenge for his earlier blow to her ego. Moreover, Lady Wishfort would think that remarrying is a sure way of depriving Mirabell from her wealth and would therefore be in a hurry to attach herself to Sir Rowland.

Analysis

This act reveals the strains between the characters as we are officially made familiar with the facts that Mrs Marwood is indeed the mistress of Fainall. Mrs Marwood continues to harbour love for Mrs Fainall's former lover - Mirabell. This act also confirms that Mirabell has had an affair with Mrs Fainall and she is quite unhappy with her current marriage to Fainall. In Mirabell's persona, the late 17th century ideal of the gentleman with both his flaws and peculiarities is foregrounded. In an age obsessed with appearances, cultivated social graces, witty repartee and good humour go on to become essential attributes to be emulated. The fact that all the women in the play are in love with Mirabell, corroborates his success in Restoration society. Such is his charm that Mrs Fainall, an old mistress turned friend, is willing to help him woo Millamant and deceive Lady Wishfort, her own mother. She never reproaches him for having left her and then carrying on an affair with her cousin. In fact, given the ethical framework of the play, it does not contradict with the idea of a gentleman. It is almost a given that such amorous intrigues are to be conducted with proper decorum and eventually a gentleman is expected to marry only a wealthy virgin. Throughout the course of the play, whatever hindrances he encounters in order to marry Millamant, are never seen as a product of his past affair. The fact that Mrs Fainall continues to be a great friend to Mirabell further confirms that she has no bitter feelings towards him (Gagen 422-27). We also discover that Mrs Marwood and Fainall's love affair lacks any sense of mutual respect and trust and has dwindled into a cynical wordplay. On the contrary, Millamant, despite all the social intrigues that surround her, continues to use her wit to a pleasant effect. She is conscious of her charming persona and its effect on Mirabell and her relationship with Mirabell serves the purpose of highlighting its contrast with that of Marwood and Fainall's love affair. The barriers in the way of fruition of Millamant and Mirabell's love are all external and they do not suffer from any internal conflicts per se.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What purpose does the epigraph and the prologue serve in the play?

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- 2) Critically comment on the character portrayal of Mirabell.

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- 3) What purpose do Witwoud, Petulant and Sir Wilful serve in the play?

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- 4) Comment on the virtues celebrated by the framework of the play.

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- 5) Do you feel a sense of double standard as far as the morality of the play is concerned?

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2.2.6 Act III

Summary

This act reveals the personality of Lady Wishfort as it begins by showing her hide her signs of ageing with application of cosmetics and drinking of brandy. Mrs Marwood then enters the house of Lady Wishfort, coaxes her to get Millamant married to Sir Wilful and informs her that her maid, Foible, was talking to Mirabell. While Mrs Marwood hides in a closet, Lady Wishfort reprimands Foible for breaking her trust and engaging in a conversation with her sworn enemy. Foible cleverly uses this moment to advance Mirabell's plot and tells her that he only stopped her to insult Lady Wishfort. After hearing this, Lady Wishfort becomes even more determined to marry Sir Rowland. After Lady Wishfort exits from the scene, Mrs Fainall comes and discusses Mirabell's scheme with Foible, unaware of the fact that Mrs Marwood is still hiding in the closet. They also discuss that Mrs Fainall has been Mirabell's mistress in the past and that Mrs Marwood nurses a secret passion for Mirabell, however he does not return her sentiment. This obviously fuels Mrs Marwood's rage (who is hiding and eavesdropping) especially after Millamant accuses her of being in love with Mirabell and passes caustic judgement about her age.

Soon after, when the guests arrive for dinner - Petulant, young Witwoud and Sir Wilful Witwoud, the scene almost dwindles into a farce, Sir Wilful does not acknowledge his foppish brother and in return the young Witwoud refuses to recognise his country bumpkin elder brother. Afterward when Mrs Marwood is left alone with Fainall, she elaborates Mirabell's plot. Fainall becomes sure now that he has been a cuckold and seeks revenge. Mrs Marwood then chalks out a plan for Fainall. Since Lady Wishfort controls Millamant's wealth, and since she is extremely fond of her daughter, Mrs Fainall, he can blackmail Lady Wishfort into handing over Millamant's fortune to him in order to prevent him from making his wife's affair with Mirabell public, thereby tarnishing her reputation.

Analysis

Though Lady Wishfort's character portrayal is stereotypical to some extent and is meant to provide comic relief - a narcissistic old woman too eager to lure a husband; but that is not to say that she has no individuality. She has been given a lot of narrative space and her dialogues become a self-incriminating testimony that lays bare her hypocrisies. She dares not smile or frown, lest the movement of her facial muscles mess her make-up. She is obsessed with appearances and, the tour of her private library (which has a collection of devotional and anti-theatrical books), to impress a casual visitor is proof of that fact - Quarles' Emblems are didactic poems, each with its moral attached; Prynne's *Histrio - Mastix* is an indictment of the immorality of the theatre; Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* was published in 1698, two years before the production of *The Way of the World*, "Bunyan's Works" again deals with Christian themes. She desperately wants to trap a man but does not want to come across as a woman who is hunting for a husband. She wants company but as is typical of all comic tropes, always invests in people who will eventually betray her. The critic Kevin J Gardener argues that the comedy of manners as a genre often concerns itself with the subversion of dominant authority represented by an older generation and consolidation of new centres of power. These anxieties are visualised by Lady Wishfort's desperate attempts to retain some modicum of power at a time when her weakening physical charm and dwindling authority transform her into the butt of ridicule and her familiar world is transplanted by a new kind of social order inaugurated and successfully implemented by Mirabell. His calm self-possession becomes a tool of power, the conflicts that were earlier resolved by resorting to violence in the feudal system are now to be solved by social intrigues and deception (53-56). To quote Gardner, "if a correct, convincing and invisible performance of gentility is essential to the success of Mirabell's grasp on patrician authority, it is no less vital to Lady Wishfort who fears deeply the loss of her social and sexual power. Certainly, a great deal of the comedy in Lady Wishfort's character evolves from her awkwardly mechanical bodily performances" (60).

Lady Wishfort's maid, Foible, is again a well-etched out character and is not representative of a typical maid that generally populates Restoration comedies. She is a vibrant young woman with a sound presence of mind who is very well acquainted with all the trickeries that goes on in the Wishfort household. In the scene between young Witwoud and Sir Wilfull, the hierarchy of values in the play are laid bare. Witwoud does display some modicum of wit. However, his behaviour towards his brother is not that of a Restoration gentleman, who might criticise Sir Wilfull's coarse mannerisms but would not go as far as to deny a blood relation. He does not display the cultivated demeanour that Mirabell would under the same circumstances. Although Sir Wilfull is a stereotypical Restoration country bumpkin, he does exhibit common sense and an honesty that makes him come across as a much better human being than his brother. Congreve has tried to foreground the differences between a true wit, false wit and fool and the comic tropes are organised to visibilise these traits in the characters of Mirabell, Fainall and Witwoud, respectively.

When Mrs Marwood gets to know through the conversation between Foible and Mrs Fainall, that Mirabell does not find her attractive, she becomes an embodiment of the typical scorned woman. The last scene between Marwood and Fainall foregrounds the trajectory of the play for the subsequent acts as they have come up with a strategic counterplot, to oppose the plot of Mirabell, the hero of the play.

2.2.7 Act IV

Summary

This act shows that Lady Wishfort is immersed in the preparation for the imminent visit of Sir Rowland. Sir Wilfull, though a bit drunk is still reeling under the influence of alcohol and therefore, is unable to complete his proposal to Millamant. In fact, he is so overwhelmed with her presence, that he becomes glad when she dismisses him. It becomes very blatant that he does not stand a chance with Millamant. Soon after this incident takes place another incident often called the proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant where they discuss the terms and conditions according to which they want to enter into matrimony. This scene concludes with Millamant confessing to Mrs Fainall that she is violently in love with Mirabell.

As Mirabell makes an exit, the company--Sir Wilfull, young Witwoud, and Petulant--come in from dinner. They are all in an inebriated state and Sir Wilfull is the most intoxicated of the three of them. Now, Mirabell's valet Waitwell assumes the false identity of Sir Rowland and arrives to court Lady Wishfort. Mrs Marwood sends a letter to tell Lady Wishfort of Mirabell's plot. But, Waitwell and Foible intervene and manage to convince Lady Wishfort that the letter is actually from Mirabell and is meant to disrupt Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland's courtship.

Analysis

This act foregrounds the different kinds of courtship in the Restoration context. It starts with country bumpkin, Sir Willful's unsuccessful attempt to woo Millamant. Then the Act shifts to the famous proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant which is the quintessential expression of love in the Restoration context. Beneath the cultivated exterior and the wordplay, Mirabell and Millamant are very much in love. However, both the characters refrain from sentimental excesses and at no point do they display a lot of emotions. In fact, they continue to maintain their poise throughout. Against a backdrop of erotic games and Machiavellian politics, Mirabell and Millamant stand as a couple with a nuanced understanding about worldly matters. Their love is sincere but not so consuming that they neglect material considerations altogether. In fact, they seem to enjoy a sense of mutual trust and respect for each other's personal freedom. Given the overall patriarchal set up, Millamant's laying down of conditions for accepting Mirabell is quite ground breaking. When Mirabell lays down the conditions, they are obviously an attempt to retain some of the societal sanctioned patriarchal power but by and large he does allow freedom to Millamant within the framework of marriage. Everything becomes a battle of wits however the sincerity of their love is not compromised.

The gentlemen - Petulant, Witwoud and Willful, drunk after dinner, who enter afterwards provide comic relief. The courtship scene of Sir Rowland and Lady Wishfort is actually a burlesque wooing as Sir Rowland is pretending to be a gentleman and Lady Wishfort plays the lustful widow. This is meant to serve as a contrast to the proviso scene which was characterised by the controlled display of emotions.

2.2.8 Act V

Summary

The scene takes place in Lady Wishfort's house and Lady Wishfort has figured out Mirabell's plot. Foible tries (unsuccessfully) to explain her position. Fainall now tries to encash the situation to his advantage. As Millamant's fortune of 6,000

pounds was presumably forfeit when she refused to marry a suitor selected for her by Lady Wishfort, he wants that fortune as his price for not tarnishing the reputation of his wife, Mrs Fainall. He also wants the remainder of her fortune turned over to him. He places a lot of thrust on Lady Wishfort not marrying again so that he remains the sole possessor of the property. These conditions are not acceptable to Lady Wishfort but Mrs Marwood coaxes her to accept these terms lest her daughter's loss of reputation becomes a public scandal. When the two maids, Foible and Mincing, now reveal that Fainall himself has cheated on his wife, he refuses to be stopped and insists that he does not mind a public scandal if he gets to shame his wife too. Out of the blue, Millamant agrees to marry Sir Wilfull as per her aunt's wishes and manages to salvage 6,000 pounds. Fainall finds this sudden change of heart a bit fishy but he continues to stake a claim on the balance of his wife's estate, and now also wants the control of Lady Wishfort's share. At this moment, Mirabell presents the proof that will guard the reputation of Mrs Fainall. Before marrying Fainall, Mrs Fainall had secretly signed over her wealth to Mirabell. The correct assessment of Fainall's character now comes handy. Now of course there is no money which Fainall can lay a claim to. Seething with rage, Fainall and Mrs Marwood leave the stage. Lady Wishfort after having realised the villainy of Fainall and Mrs Marwood, willingly pardons Mirabell and gives him consent to marry her niece Millamant. The play comes to an end on this happy note.

Analysis

The fifth act is replete with trickeries, intrigues and plotting and it does get a bit difficult to keep up with them at times. The villainy of Fainall is exposed fully when he is willing to walk an extra mile to bring public disgrace to his wife. It also becomes evident that for all his wit and wordplay, he is not the ideal gentleman in the scheme of the play because he is full of bitterness and beneath his polished exterior there is no modicum of pleasantness or genuine emotion. As opposed to him, Mirabell is capable of experiencing genuine emotion. He might be practical but he never lets his concerns about logistics overpower the pleasantness of his demeanour. Of course, he is not without faults and can be extremely manipulative but knows how to maintain a sense of equilibrium between self-interest and consideration for others. As the critic, Robert Markley argues, Mirabell combines the typical traits of rakish behaviour with "the emerging view of the hero as a moral man who deserves to triumph" (197). This reconceptualisation informs the persona of Mirabell both in his courtship with Millamant and his resourcefulness in bringing harmony to the chaos that had been unleashed in the household of Lady Wishfort (Braverman 27). Structurally speaking, the last act reveals how the plot of Mirabell was balanced by the counterplot of Fainall and Mrs Marwood. Their scheme is destroyed by Foible and Mincing on the one hand, and by Millamant's pretence to marry Sir Wilfull on the other. But when Fainall wants the rest of Mrs Fainall's money, Mirabell's ingenuity and correct assessment of the character come to the rescue when he shows the deed signed before Mrs Fainall's marriage, presumably as a preventive measure for just such a situation. Fainall, the fortune-hunter who would have been hailed as a gallant in the heyday of Restoration comedy, becomes for Congreve, the antagonist who despite all his wit and wordplay, lacks the amiability which is a prerequisite for the changing conceptions of a "hero." Absolutist Cavalier values are transplanted with Whig moderation. Fainall, who stands for predatory behaviour synonymous with the typical Restoration rake who had to become a husband compelled by monetary avarice, is replaced by Mirabell, the reformed rake who is a harbinger of a new order. Fainall stands for the old order symbolising that property follows political

legitimacy. Au contraire, Mirabell emphasises the victory of the negotiated contract, metaphorically represented by the legal document.

Lady Wishfort, in this act, also undergoes a change of heart and the vicissitudes of recent life experiences almost make her into a sympathetic character. Her genuine attempts to protect her daughter do redeem her character to some extent and her entrapment in the treachery of those she blindly relied upon puts her in a very unusual position. The play ends on a happy note with the promise of Mirabell's and Millamant's marriage. Their marriage has socio-political echoes. On one hand it is what Lawrence Stone calls a, "companionate marriage" which is the most perfect arrangement for conjugal bliss (325). On the other hand, a balance between claims of sexual passion and property is achieved, which constitutes the foundation of domestic ideal, (Braverman, 155).

Given his poise, charming persona, epigrammatic wit, Mirabell personifies Congreve's rejoinder to a society grappling with flux owing to the disintegration of patrician authority and the rise of new social values. His rakish charisma balanced proportionately with upcoming virtues associated with self-restraint and reliance on legality, makes him a befitting hero for the changing times that celebrate the decline of an erstwhile form of aristocratic authority represented by the Stuart era. The satirical impulse of *The Way of the World* is aimed at the unsuccessful machinations of the older social order at guarding some vestiges of authority and much of the play's comic tropes emanate from the ridiculous demeanours of the likes of Lady Wishfort in the face of inexorable changes. As the critic Gardner argues "the play's meaning, hinges on the figures of Mirabell and Millamant, who by embracing principles of civilised self-restraint, by naturalising their performances, and by solemnizing their love through legal rhetoric, demonstrate that this new social order requires one to eschew traditional Stuart authority and to develop relationships based on the principle of the law. This new vision of patrician authority, Congreve's play urges us to accept, is the way of the world" (71). However, despite its comic closure, the play leaves us with some troubling reminders - for instance, Mrs Fainall's fate is left to hang by a thread. This nagging doubt continues to haunt readers as to why Mirabell did not marry Mrs Fainall when she was an affluent widow with whom he did have an affair? They appear to trust each other and as yet, he gets her married to a dubious man like Mr Fainall when they suspected she might be pregnant? Moreover, Mrs Marwood and Mr Fainall have vowed revenge and might possibly return to make life difficult for her. In a play heavily obsessed with the celebration of youthful pursuits, a character like Lady Wishfort cannot possibly be accommodated in this happy universe and must be reduced to a pathetic, pitiable woman. However, given the comic closure and the merry dancing, all these uncomfortable questions and tensions about limited conceptualisations of morality and blatant hypocrisy of societal standards, are eventually subsumed under the rhetoric of love of the protagonists - Mirabell and Millamant.

2.2.9 Epilogue

Commentary

The epilogue only carries forward the points already stated in the prologue and once again, highlights that critics are not sufficiently equipped to pass judgement on the play and make statements without any knowledge. The epilogue also states that the characters are fictitious and do not bear direct resemblance to any individual and that the satire is universally applicable.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Critically comment on the character portrayal of Lady Wishfort.
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- 2) The marriage of Mirabell and Millamant is an ideal intersection of romantic love and materialistic considerations. Discuss.
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- 3) Compare and contrast Mirabell and Fainall.
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- 4) How does Mrs Fainall become an unsettling reminder of the hypocritical moral parameters of the Restoration society?
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2.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a summary and an analysis of the five acts of *The Way of the World* by critically scrutinising the comic tropes and the manner in which they have been strategically deployed by Congreve to address the concerns of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The play satirises the affectations and pretences of the people who inhabit the beau monde and also exposes the Machiavellian tricks they deploy to sustain their position there. The narrative politics of the play foregrounds the changing ideological landscape. The marriage of Mirabell and Millamant uphold the virtues of civilisational restraint, legality and moderation, dominantly associated with the worldview of the Whigs.

2.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. It sets the mood of the play that is going to deal with romantic intrigues of the beau monde. Gives an opportunity to Congreve to express his anger (though in a playful manner) against the audience who did not receive his play well. Congreve also tries to explain that "affectation" is different from "natural folly" and his play should be comprehended keeping that distinction

in mind. He also makes a jibe against the morality bandwagons that have been clamouring for a moral reform of the drama.

2. Mirabell is the ideal gentleman in the play who strikes a balance between a typical rakish character and an overtly sentimental hero prone to excesses. He is sophisticated and polished in his behaviour without giving the impression that he is pretending to be someone he is actually not. The fact that all the women in the play crave for his attention is a testimony to his charm. Given the double standards prevalent in his society, Mirabell does not suffer for his affair with Mrs Fainall (She becomes a very lonely woman as the play reaches its closure), on the contrary he gets to marry a wealthy virgin in the end.
3. Their exaggerated, hyperbolic personalities serve to highlight Mirabell as the ideal gentleman who knows how to balance the various attributes of his personality. Their presence also brings comic relief by foregrounding the discrepancies between their traits and the virtues celebrated by the Restoration society.
4. The play celebrates the triumph of Whig moderation characterised by self-restraint and contractual obligations rather than absolutist powers. Desire is closely embedded in financial considerations and a prudent marriage would ideally be a union of romantic love and economic stability. The uncontrolled sway of the appetites celebrated during the heyday of the Restoration of Charles II has no place in the contemporary society that is steadily aligning itself with middle-class morality and work ethic governed by self-discipline.
5. For all the playful bantering and the sprightly wit, the play has a very gendered notion of morality. Mrs. Fainall's reputation becomes amenable to a public scandal due to a past affair whereas Mirabell can merrily go on to marry a wealthy virgin without paying any price for his past shenanigans. Like all comedy of manners, the play is heavily biased in favour of the young and denigrates ageing, as embodied in the character portrayal of Lady Wishfort.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Lady Wishfort embodies the stereotypical traits of a lusty old woman and her ludicrous attempts to retain her sexual and social authority in the wake of changing ideological landscape of her society creates humour. Also, she is not merely a stock character but is highly individualised too and enjoys a lot of narrative space. The play's comic universe is heavily biased in favour of the celebration of the romantic intrigues of the young and that is why the happy closure has no space for an ageing woman who has lost her physical appeal and by the end she becomes a pitiable figure who has been betrayed by all she trusted.
2. The ideal protagonists of comedy of manners cannot be ostensibly be obsessed with money, but at the same time they cannot be expected to believe that love conquers all. Their ironic self-awareness guides them through the labyrinthine trails of love ensuring that they do not lose out on the material aspects of creating a "good life" together.
3. Mirabell and Fainall have a lot of similarities - verbal sophistication, quick wit and acumen for social intrigues. Mirabell for all his rakish charm has learnt to moderate his appetite and learnt self-restraint, whereas Fainall is impulsive and incapable of experiencing genuine emotion. His cynicism has made him a bitter person. Mirabell on the contrary, has relatively learnt

to balance the gratification of senses with consideration of others. He is therefore like a reformed rake suitable for the changing times under the rule of William III and Mary II who propagated a different set of values associated with middle-class morality.

4. Though Mrs. Fainall never gets bitter towards Mirabell for having left her, in fact she helps Mirabell to outwit her mother so that he can marry Millamant, one can sense that by the end of the play she becomes a lonely, pitiable figure. The fact that Mirabell gets a wealthy virgin, whereas Mrs. Fainall is left alone to fend for herself speaks volumes about the double standards in the sexual morality of the 18th century. Only young, wealthy virgins are worthy of a happy ending that is characteristic of a comedy of manners, whereas those who do not fulfil these credentials are eventually excluded and left on the margins of society.

2.5 GLOSSARY

<i>Affectation:</i>	Noticeable artificiality in manners, the pretence of possessing some qualities not actually there.
<i>Beau monde:</i>	Fashionable high society that is obsessed with appearances and social graces.
<i>Country bumpkin:</i>	An unsophisticated/ rustic person hailing from rural area.
<i>Epigrammatic:</i>	Clever and concise use of words for an amusing purpose.
<i>Fop:</i>	A man who is obsessed with his attires and appearance, a dandy. Such characters were very commonly found in comedy of manners.
<i>Horace:</i>	(65 BC - 8 BC) A famous Roman poet and satirist under the emperor Augustus.
<i>Machiavellian:</i>	Resorting to unscrupulous measures and deceptions to maintain authority.
<i>Repertory:</i>	A storehouse.

UNIT 3 *THE WAY OF THE WORLD: THEMES*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Thematic Analysis
 - 3.2.1 Class Politics
 - 3.2.2 Love and Marriage
 - 3.2.3 The Ideal Gentleman post Glorious Revolution
 - 3.2.4 The Subversion of Authority
 - 3.2.5 Wit and Wordplay
 - 3.2.6 Schemes, Intrigues and Deceptions
 - 3.2.7 Comedy of Manners
- 3.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.5 Glossary

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?

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

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

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- 4) What purpose does Mrs Fainall serve in the play?

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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 cuckolding 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?

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- 2) What does the continuous plotting and scheming in the play imply about the beau monde?

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

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

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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 alternative 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.
3. It satirises the affectations and pretensions of the upper strata of the Restoration period. Presence of stock characters - Petulant, Lady Wishfort, Sir Wilful. Romantic intrigues, cuckolding, scheming constitute the plotline.
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 blurts out witty repartees.

3.5 GLOSSARY

<i>Bourgeois ideology:</i>	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.
<i>Cultural Capital:</i>	The possession of knowledge and behavioural skills that a person can foreground to signal one's social status.
<i>Ideological Politics:</i>	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.

<i>Malapropism:</i>	Misuse of words in a ridiculous manner.
<i>Panoply:</i>	A wide spectrum.
<i>Patrilineal:</i>	Determining descent through the male line.
<i>Patrician:</i>	Aristocrat
<i>Stultified:</i>	To render something ridiculous
<i>Trajectory:</i>	Curve
<i>Transgressive:</i>	A breach of conventional morality or violation of a law



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UNIT 4 *THE WAY OF THE WORLD:* SYMBOLS, ALLEGORIES AND MOTIFS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Analysis of Major Symbols, Allegories and Motifs
 - 4.2.1 Lady Wishfort's House
 - 4.2.2 Makeup
 - 4.2.3 The Mall, St. James Park and Chocolate House
 - 4.2.4 Masks
 - 4.2.5 Title of the Play
 - 4.2.6 Legal Contract
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will do an in-depth analysis of the major symbols, allegories and motifs in *The Way of the World*. The endeavour will be to assess them vis-a-vis the contexts in which they appear and then examine their contribution to the progression of the narrative.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A critical analysis of the symbols, allegories and motifs will make you aware about the working of the ideological politics of the playwright. The narrative spaces enjoyed by the different symbolic structures/ presences give us a sneak-peek into the socio-political and cultural belief systems espoused by Congreve and the parameters that readers/ audiences are expected to keep in mind while understanding the play.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF MAJOR SYMBOLS, ALLEGORIES AND MOTIFS

Lady Wishfort's House is the locale where most of the drama unfolds, making it obvious that the play primarily deals with deceptions, trickeries and conspiracies in a family that is symptomatic of the larger crisis happening in the macrocosm of 18th century society. Compelled by forces of change and caught in the quagmire of conflicting values, Lady Wishfort's house is on the verge of collapse, literally and metaphorically.

4.2.1 Lady Wishfort's House

Despite her legal power, her inability to circumvent the financial crisis created by Fainall makes her vulnerable to loss of her property as well as a public scandal about her daughter, Mrs Fainall's affair. Allegorically, the house represents an

older value system of patrician authority that is gradually losing its relevance in the wake of the constitutional monarchy established under William III and Mary II. Unlike the erstwhile feudal values, new principles associated with mercantile capitalism are assuming prominence and unless she transforms herself and her kinship structures (according to the emergent value systems), neither she nor her house will survive. The feudal excesses need to be checked, regulated and monitored in keeping with the changing times.

Mirabell, her niece's lover, represents the force of change that will also be the agency and resourcefulness to tide over the crisis that is looming over her house. Eventually, Lady Wishfort is driven by circumstances to seek the help of Mirabell, her former enemy, to rescue her and preserve the reputation of her family. Lady Wishfort's house is at last saved by Mirabell's intervention, giving out the larger message that expression of violence or physical force is no longer a viable means to safeguard oneself and the modern socio-cultural economy demands resourcefulness of a new kind if the patrician class does not want to become redundant. Nobody in the play can match up to his linguistic sprezzatura and calm self-possession even in the most trying of circumstances. So no wonder, he is almost single-handedly responsible for bringing order and stability to the chaos that has been brewing in Lady Wishfort's house for so long.

4.2.2 Makeup

The triangular relationship between women, makeup and society has mostly been fraught with irreconcilable contradictions in the dominant imagination. The relationship between women and cosmetics become more tenuous when it involves older women. The contemporary feminist critic, Nivedita Menon deploys the nude-make up analogy to deconstruct the functioning of the normative social order. The idea behind nude make-up looks are all about one's skin looking impeccable without looking like one is even wearing any make-up at all. To achieve this flawless look all one needs is a series of products that will give the skin a 'natural' looking glow. Sustaining the social order and preventing it from turning into chaos necessitates the faithful performance of the prescribed rituals over and over again throughout one's lifetime. Highly complex networks of socio-cultural reproduction go into it. But the ultimate aim of this relentless activity is to produce the semblance of untouched naturalness (Intro vii). When the effort starts showing too much, it becomes a cause of concern or the woman becomes an object of ridicule. This is exactly what happens in the play.

In Act III of the play, we encounter Lady Wishfort lamenting about her painted face and calling herself - "an old peel'd wall." Her concern with her face mirrors a deeper anxiety about her ageing body and loss of socio-cultural power. Though she has some legal power as she controls Millamant's fortune, but the limited parameters of her agency become palpable when she desperately seeks Mirabell's assistance to outwit the legal troubles engineered by Fainall. Her peeling face paint metaphorically represents her crumbling social authority and her ridiculous attempts to retain some vestiges of power. The painted face also belies the excessive thrust put upon appearances in a society that overvalues the external manifestation at the cost of actuality.

In the popular Proviso scene, Mirabell demands that Millamant's natural beauty should not be covered by painting and implicit here is the notion that his love for her exceeds mere transitory sexual attraction. However, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that Lady Wishfort's obsessive desire to cling on to her decaying physical charm is posed as the future reality that all women in the play

will have to deal with once their beauty fades. Though of course, the resolution of the play reduces everything to the rhetoric of love and downplays all female characters' concern with loss of youth and charm.

4.2.3 The Mall, St. James Park and Chocolate House

Congreve deploys the structural conventions and settings of the earlier Restoration comedies but reinvents them to render them appropriate for the new set of values that were becoming popular. Though earlier, during the heyday of the Restoration, they were sites of sexual escapades, the Mall, St James Park and Chocolate House come to serve very different purposes in *The Way of the World*. This is again symptomatic of the changing socio-cultural ethos of the 18th century society that was altering itself structurally to accommodate the values associated with middle-class respectability and mercantile capitalism.

The Chocolate House becomes a fashionable place for the people with physical and cultural capital to indulge in witty repartee, play cards - sophisticated social discourse minus any bawdiness that was a staple ingredient of the erstwhile Restoration comedies. Similarly, St James Park and the Mall are comfortable avenues for meeting friends to have a conversation or a walk. (Thomas 24)

Congregating at the James Park, Mall or the Chocolate House becomes a way for characters to signal the possession of material wealth and linguistic dexterity that was increasingly prized as a very significant socio-cultural resource necessary for inclusion in the polite society. In the play, the characters often assemble at these sites to advance a plot or discuss conspiracies to attain money, love and power, thereby foregrounding the intrigues, subterfuges and trickeries beneath the veneer of sophistication. But the play seem to be drawing binaries between conspiring to attain material wealth for physical wellbeing, striking a prudent marriage (represented by Mirabell) and plotting to gain money to satisfy aggressive sensualist impulses and avarice (represented by Fainall). Hence, as per the rationale of the play, cultural sophistication and linguistic skills need to be complemented with some sense of propriety, decorum and prudence for truly prospering in the ethos of 18th century London.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What purpose did Chocolate Houses, St James Park and the Mall serve in the Restoration period?
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- 2) Why have women always had a very complicated relationship with makeup? Explain with reference to *The Way of the World*.
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- 3) Do you think the play constructs dichotomies between plotting that is justified and plotting that is unnecessarily creating chaos?
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- 4) What is the play's attitude towards old age?

4.2.4 Masks

As opposed to the idealism of the Renaissance, which had proclaimed that honour always follows virtue, the contemporary 18th century society seemingly acknowledged that inner worth does not always guarantee success. In the scheme of the play, the ideal is a permutation and combination of beauty, intellect, social grace and youth and having them endows the possessor with some degree of power over others. Most of the characters in the play do not have these traits in the desired proportion and are trying to channelize their efforts into copying them and making a fool of themselves (Lyons 259). Nothing haunts the universe of Congreve as the loss of reputation and an excessive obsession with safeguarding reputation has led most of the characters to disguise their actual emotional deficiencies/jealousies behind masks.

The quintessential comic resolution is an action of unravelling and unmasking the imposter. As the critic, Charles R Lyons argues that "W.G. Moore's discussion of the comic mask is one of the most meaningful of recent examinations of comedy. Moore uses masks in a metaphorical sense, explaining the complexity of attitudes which exist in a finely made comedy. His discussion of the tension between reality and the affectation of social behaviour are applicable to Congreve as well (262)." Petulant and Witwoud pose as witty men but their lack of self-awareness often makes them the laughing stock. Mrs Marwood suffers from an inability to guard her passions, wearing a mask to hide the resentment she feels at Mrs Fainall's treatment of her. Millamant's indifference towards Mirabell also comes across as contrived because confessing her feelings for him would render her vulnerable. It is only Mirabell who fully understands the value of self-restraint and has effectively tamed all manifestations of passion and emotions not just publically but even in private. On the contrary, Lady Wishfort's performance is too obvious. Lady Wishfort has such poor control over the expression of her emotions that her anger makes a crack in the mask of her face paint. To quote Kevin J Gardner, "Lady Wishfort's unsuccessfully mechanized performance and her uncertainty about just what constitutes the most natural performance reveal her fear of both sexual and social instability, for not only does she secretly fret that she is no longer sexually desirable, she also obsesses over correct patrician manners."

Outward manifestations and overtly performative characteristics have taken precedence over genuine expressions and have become an end in themselves, but they cannot go on like this and need to be rectified. As James Neufeld argues that "Charming though they are, Millamant's affectations cannot continue indefinitely without running the risk of hardening into a grotesque mask. And through Millamant, rather than Lady Wishfort, Congreve does suggest the means by which correction will take place. The corrective influence is marriage," (242).

Let us discuss the title of the play next.

4.2.5 Title of the Play

The Way of the World is a comedy and none of the characters have been portrayed in an idealistic manner or as a paragon of virtue. The readers'/ audience's admiration for the protagonists is also coloured by the limitations imposed by comic conventions. There is an implicit understanding that there is no escape possible from "the way of the world" to an idyllic space removed from the ravages of time, therefore, to successfully traverse the sinuous pathways of this world it is necessary to develop self-awareness, knowledge of functioning of society and amused irony (Kaufman 425-26).

The protagonists - Mirabell and Millamant have been able to distinguish themselves from the others by their ability to view their society the way it is, neither glorifying it nor vilifying it. Amidst all the chaos and mess, they have managed to retain an ironic self-awareness of the world. But they have not let the logistics of living and practical considerations dim their emotional depth. Nor have they permitted the vicissitudes of life to transform them into bitter cynics. Their courtship and marriage bear testimony to their very pragmatic outlook that acknowledges that while mutual love and respect constitute the fulcrum of a healthy marriage, material resources are pre-requisites for a comfortable marital life that will grant both husband and wife some personal freedom within the overall framework of companionship.

The play is not trying to hanker after utopian possibilities in some higher realms but seems to be foregrounding that the Hobbesian power struggle could be tempered with the proper cultivation of virtues of self-preservation, decorum, propriety and prudence. The denial of human appetites will only create repression that will manifest itself later in very troubling forms, but excessive indulgence will also create anarchy. It seems to indicate that neither radical destabilisation nor passive acceptance is the solution. But striking a balance between extremes of behavioural traits is very important for navigating through these mundane societal issues. Given the narrative progression of the play and its closure, no other title could have been more befitting than "The Way of the World" because by deploying irony and sarcasm, Congreve is celebrating 18th century society in all its contradictory rhythms.

4.2.6 Legal Contract

The Way of the World manifests the ethos and value systems of the new age following the Glorious Revolution and consolidation of the constitutional monarchy under William III and Mary II. On one hand, the power of the monarchy was restricted, on the other hand, the bourgeoisie was emerging as a significant stakeholder as far as the economy was considered and gradually their moral principles started penetrating the social fabric of 18th century society. If monarchy was premised upon a sense of contract and consent, the same was true for all human relationships. The rising merchant class dealt with the palpable realities of money and property in daily life, consequently, they prioritised contractual commitments over handed down entitlements (Thomas 21). Congreve, following John Locke's philosophy, believed that we live in a society ridden with divisive forces and contentious issues, but it can be made liveable with the help of legal contracts and arrangements. The driving impulses of the play are the plotting and counter-plotting by the characters and in the process this somewhat Hobbesian power struggle is rendered prominent. But the ending foregrounds that these traits could be regulated and controlled through contractual obligations. In Congreve's

social scheme, money and property constitute the fulcrum of a civilised society. In the play, amidst contracts that were made on the basis of expediency and monetary avarice, stands the contract mutually entered by Mirabell and Millamant before marriage - that acknowledges the flaws in each other, potential sources of contention and the structural issues in how their society functions. On one hand, this contract is a very practical understanding of human relationships, belying that love does not conquer all. On the other hand, this is a step towards equality in marriage. Given the trajectory of the play and the spatio-temporal location, the contract also represents that the only manner in which human beings can stay together amicably is through binding arrangements.

Similarly, an obsessive concern with property and material comfort contours the progression of the play. Mirabell indulges in a series of machinations against his beloved's aunt so that he can safeguard his marital future. In fact, all the characters in the play seem to share a general understanding that material wealth is a prerequisite for a relatively happy and secure life but this is to be contrasted with an aggressive pursuit of money solely motivated by avarice. Mrs Fainall had handed her entire property to Mirabell, prior to her marriage with Fainall and this correct estimation of Fainall's character proves to be handy when he tries to stake a claim in her property in exchange for not tarnishing her reputation. The existence of a prior legal contract saves Mrs Fainall's reputation and autonomy and foils Fainall's conspiracy. Not only this but the contract also rescues Mrs Fainall, and helps Mirabell to marry Millamant happily with her aunt's permission (Thomas 34-36).

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Does the play uphold bourgeoisie ideology and mercantile capitalism?
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- 2) What is the play's solution to the Hobbesian power struggle?
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- 3) 18th century society overvalues appearance. How are Mirabell and Millamant truly the creatures of their time and yet different from the other characters in the play?
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- 4) If the monarchy were premised upon a sense of contract and consent, the same becomes true for all human relationships. How is this true for the universe of *The Way of the World*?
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4.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has undertaken an analysis of the major symbols, allegories and motifs that populate the universe of *The Way of the World* and has critically engaged with them to understand the ideological politics of the narrative. The symbols and motifs cannot be divorced from 18th century England that was slowly transitioning from an extremely feudal society characterised by rigid hierarchies to a relatively fluid social order which started prizing personal merit over inheritance. This unit has helped you to make sense of the major symbolic presences in the story, which contour the narrative and make it possible for readers to read it from alternative perspectives, by going against the grain.

4.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. These were popular places where the fashionable elite gathered to hone and exhibit their linguistic virtuosity, social graces and mannerisms. Visiting these places endowed the people with cultural capital and facilitated their inclusion in the polite society. During the heyday of the Restoration period, they were often seen as sites of sexual shenanigans, but after the Glorious Revolution, they became places for sophisticated social discourse.
2. Women across time and culture often have had to deal with societal pressure to look perfect and consequently, they have often been mocked for their attempts - application of cosmetics and makeup, to get that flawless skin texture. The Restoration society placed an excessive thrust on appearances and took the obsession with appearing perfect to its logical extreme. While society is still gentle in its mocking of the young but when it comes to old women (who clearly have lost certain privileges owing to their lack of physical attractiveness) desiring to appear youthful, the tone often becomes bitter and harsh. Lady Wishfort is a butt of ridicule because of her inability to come to terms with her ageing body and her relentless efforts to look young and sexually desirable.
3. All the characters in the play actively participate in machinations to attain their personal agendas. But the play creates binaries between characters who plan and plot to secure their future (For instance, Mirabell) and characters who conspire to aggressively pursue wealth to fulfil their greed. (For instance, Fainall). So the play celebrates pursuit of wealth to lead a harmonious life but vilifies accumulation of wealth for its own sake.
4. A comedy of manners conventionally celebrates youthfulness and merrymaking. This celebration is often characterised by the young claiming the forefront of action and sidelining the older generation. By the end of the play, Lady Wishfort is betrayed by all she blindly trusted and is reduced to a pitiable figure, stripped of whatever little power she had in the beginning.

Check Your Progress 2

1. *The Way of the World* expresses the ethos of the new age following the Glorious Revolution and consolidation of the constitutional monarchy under

William III and Mary II. The rising merchant class dealt with the tangible realities of money and property in their everyday life, consequently, they privileged contractual commitments over handed down entitlements. In Congreve's social scheme, possession of money and property constitute the fundamentals of a civilized society and human beings should learn how to manage their wealth and lifestyle following the principles of decorum, propriety and prudence.

2. Congreve, following John Locke's philosophy, argued that society is replete with contentious issues, but it can be made enduring with the help of legal contracts and arrangements. The Hobbesian power struggle is a given fact of human existence but it can be tempered through contractual obligations that have to be adhered to in order to save oneself from legal repercussions.
3. Mirabell and Millamant have successfully internalised the ethos of their time and learnt to manoeuvre through the labyrinthine byways of the 18th century society. They have a pragmatic outlook about life and do not view their existence through a romanticised vantage point. However, despite living in a society obsessed with superficialities and trifles, they have managed to retain emotional depth and thoughtfulness.
4. The Glorious Revolution championed the Whig cause and aligned itself with middle-class aspirations and values. This new system of values was in direct contradistinction to the erstwhile monarchical excesses and arbitrary exercise of power. This also trickled down to the microcosm of society and a sense of contract premised upon consent becomes the guiding force of all human relationships, for instance, the proviso episode in the play. In fact, the play as a whole is full of legal arrangements and contractual obligations and successful navigation through these legalities is the road to power and prestige in the 18th century socio-cultural and economic milieu.

4.5 GLOSSARY

<i>Belie:</i>	To misrepresent
<i>Feudal:</i>	This is related to the system in which people were given land and protection by people of higher rank and worked and fought for them in return.
<i>Idyllic:</i>	Charmingly simple.
<i>Irreconcilable:</i>	Incompatible.
<i>Quagmire:</i>	Dilemma or confusion.
<i>Mercantile Capitalism:</i>	This was dominant in parts of Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries, a kind of proto-industrialization. This was also responsible for driving forward the imperialism of this period.
<i>Sprezzatura:</i>	This is an Italian word that makes its first known appearance in Castiglione's <i>The Book of Courtier</i> (1528). This word implies a certain attempt to strategically disguise all art so that every action or utterance appears to be effortless.
<i>Utopic:</i>	Related to an ideal place

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