

William Congreve and "The Way of the World" as a Restoration Comedy:

Restoration Comedy is a type of Restoration Drama, which is related with the manners and attitudes of the characters and what the audience laugh at them after the pursuit of sex and money. In a way, the Comedy of Manners is a witty, and cerebral form of dramatic comedy that depicts and often satirizes the manners and affectations of a contemporary society. A comedy of manners is concerned with social usage and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standards. The plot of such a comedy, usually concerned with an illicit love affair or similarly scandalous matter, is subordinate to the play's brittle atmosphere, witty dialogue, criticism and commentary on human foibles. "The Way of the World" which is written by William Congreve, is a restoration comedy play with its witty dialogues between the characters, criticism of the upper class people's manners and also satiric and effective scenes such as lady and maid; unmasking scene of male libertine and proviso scene that ends in a lyrical celebration of unity.

"The Way of the World" (1700), in fact "a world of wit and pleasure inhabited by persons of quality and deformed neither by realism nor by farce" (Congreve, p.401) which has come to be regarded as one of the great comedies in the English language. The plays of Congreve are considered the greatest achievement of Restoration comedy. They are comedies of manners, depicting an artificial and narrow world as explained above, peopled by characters of nobility and fashion, to whom manners, especially gallantry, are more important than morals such as Mirabell, Lady Wishfort, and Fainall. No doubt, Congreve's view of mankind is amused and cynical. His characters are constantly engaged in complicated intrigues, usually centering around money like Mirabell, which involve mistaken identities like Mrs. Marwood, the signing or not signing of legal documents, weddings in masquerade.

As a Restoration Period comedy play, the story revolves around a pair of lovers, Millamant and Mirabell, who establish a rather unconventional marriage arrangement based on their knowledge of the way of the world which, as they know, is inhabited primarily by intriguers, fops, and fools. The satire and criticism of upper class people's manners and behaviours are variable in many examples through the play. For example, Mirabell's admiration for money more than his love to Millamant; and also Lady Wishfort's coquette attitudes such as overdressing and making up.

As Congreve mentions that: "Those characters are meant to be ridiculous in most of our comedies", (Burns, Edward. Restoration Comedy: Crises of Desire and Identity. London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1987.) ironically, he tells the truth and does the right one.

On the other hand, Mirabell plots to marry Lady Wishfort to Sir Rowland which appeals to her vanity and to her desire for revenge. In this situation, "Sir Rowland" is rumored to be Mirabel's

uncle, a man who hates Mirabell and who could, by having a male child of his own, disinherit Mirabell in Millamant's father's will. Mrs. Fainall's aids Mirabell in this fiction because she is disgusted with her husband's unfaithfulness with Mrs. Marwood. It is mentioned that: "Congreve's play sets up a subplot and main plot in which servants mimic the behaviors of the aristocrats and their would-be followers. "

So, it is obvious that there is the aspects of the hypocrisy, selfishness, and ungratefulness of the characters who called "upper class" and "aristocrats" in society. As the result, it can be said that, the satire and criticism of these selfish and proud characters are derived from the characteristics of Restoration Comedy.

Besides this, there are many "witty" dialogues between the characters that implies deep and ironic meanings under the effect of the comedy of manners. For instance;

"Mirabell: You are very free with your friend's acquaintance.

Witwoud: Aye, aye, friendship without freedom is as dull as love without enjoyment or wine without toasting. But to tell you a secret, these are trulls whom he allows coachire, and something more, by the week, to call on him once a day at public places." (p.409)

This quotation may be named as a witty dialogue because it reveal the realities under the shadow of the implications, ironies and metaphors related with the concepts of freedom and joy. Mirabell thinks that Witwoud is speaking very freely and using his "wit" , which is also related with his name, tries to show the realities under the shadow of ironies, metaphors, and implications.

He answers the question by mentioning the importance of freedom in a friendship. In fact, Witwoud is a classical character of comedy of manners, created by Congreve, as a cunning, clever, and creative man who is aware of talking to a dangerous person.

Then, as another important point, the significant scenes of "The Way of the World" as a comedy of manners, should be explained. Basicly, there are three important scenes in the play. First one can be named as the Lady&Maid scene in which the audience expect the lady (Lady Wishfort) without make up and mask, and expectedly; ugly. In addition, we also learn her hatred for male libertine when she says "I'll have him murdered! I'll have him poisoned..." for Mirabell. (p.419) The second scene can be said as the unmasking scene of the male libertine in which all plans and tricks are revealed. Although the characters are in a bad

situation, it's funny position for the audience to laugh at them; and that is why the restoration comedy is also called as a comedy of manners in which the audience laugh at the characters' situation after their manners related with sex, money, marriage, and selfishness. After that, the last scene is also the end of the play in which the equality and unity between two sexes is established. The mutual love, respect, freedom and trust are very important for both male and female characters. At the end of the play, Fainall springs his trap, demanding Lady Wishfort's estate, his wife's estate, and half of Millamant's inheritance in return for Fainall's not charging his wife with adultery. Mrs. Fainall dares them to attempt prosecution because she has proof of innocence, but Mrs. Marwood convinces Lady Wishfort that the press coverage of the trial would humiliate the family. Thus, these three common scenes are very significant with their relationship of Restoration Comedy.

So, it's obvious that in Congreve's "The Way of the World" the trend of restoration continues, but marriage becomes more about contractual agreements and greed, then about love. Millamant and Mirabell iron out a prenuptial agreement before they agree to marry. Then Millamant, for an instant, seems willing to marry her cousin, Sir Willful, so that she can keep her money. "Sex in Congreve," Mr. Lindsay says, "is a battle of the wits. It is not a battlefield of emotions." (Lindsay, Alexander. William Congreve: The Critical Heritage. London: The Routledge Press Ltd. 1989)

Without doubt, it's comical to see the two wits going at it, but, when we look deeper, there is an edge of seriousness behind their words. After they list conditions, Mirabell says, "These provisos admitted, in other things I may prove a tractable and complying husband." (p.423)

Love may be the basis of their relationship, as Mirabell appears honest; however, their alliance is a sterile romance, devoid of the "touchy, feely stuff," which we hope for in a courtship. Mirabell and Millamant are two wits perfect for each other in the battle of the sexes; nevertheless, the pervading sterility and greed reverberates as the relationship between the two wits becomes much more confusing. But then, that is the way of the world. In this situation, it can be assumed that the Restoration Period was the period of logic and wit instead of sense and emotions. Maybe, that is why William Congreve, as a passionate unmarried man, became a successful restoration period playwright who had the abilities of using a perfect and witty language, showing the importance of logic, criticising the behaviours of upper class people and also making satire in terms of the aspects of the period, in "The Way of the World." As Congreve created these characters to behave according to the aspects of the period and comedy of manners; such an explanation is given for the reason of the situation: "Why in the play Mirabell should want to saddle himself with Millamant; they want each other because they do; it is a given that the audience understands because the performers cast in the roles have been chosen so as to make it subconsciously obvious they are made for each other." (Hume, Robert D. The Rakish Stage: Studies in English Drama, 1660-1800. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.) Probably, this is another aspect of Restoration comedy according to the conditions of the period.

To sum up, the main goal of the comedy of manners in the period of Restoration is to mock society, or in other ways lift up society for scrutiny, which could cause negative or positive results. In the end, if the playwright has been successful, the audience will leave the theater feeling good, or at least feeling something, having laughed at themselves and society. Congreve's writing style shows both intelligence and sympathy with his creativity of the characters fixed with the aspects of the Restoration Comedy. The selfish, absurd and unbalanced manners of the characters (upper class aristocrats) are criticised clearly with the ironic and satiric usage of Congreve. Also, the importance of witty dialogues and unmasking scene of male libertine cannot be disregarded as the absolute proofs of the comedy of manners.