
“The Way of The World” as a Comedy of Manners

William Congreve is the best and finest writer of the comedy of manners. We may say that he has invented a new art of comedy. His *The Way of the World* is considered as a work of art and as a pure comedy of manners. It is the apotheosis of the comedy of manners. It is a remarkable demonstration of Congreve's technical skill as a playwright. Here we find an ironic commentary on the ways of society of the time.

The comedy of manners is a genuine reflection of the temper of the upper classes of the nation. It deals the external details of life, the fashion of the time, its manners, its speech and its interest. The dramatists confine themselves to the drawing rooms, the coffee houses, the clubs, the gambling centers, the streets and gardens of London. The characters represent the people of fashion. The plots of comedy of manners are mainly love intrigues. They are remarkable for neat, precise, witty, balanced and lucid prose style.

The Way of the World has all the important characteristics of the comedy of manners. The aim of this comedy is to show the manners of the upper ranks of contemporary society. It satirically presents the aristocratic London society. The purpose is to hit at the follies and foibles of people. Here Congreve has regarded London as his world. The presentation of the high society of London is his soul concern. All the scenes in this play are laid in Lady Wishfort's house, a chocolate house and St. James' Park. All the characters are imbued with the spirit of London life. They are chiefly people of fashion. They are fond of games of love intrigues. This is the true style of the comedy of manners.

Sex is treated with utter frankness and candidness in the comedy of manners. Its subject is the intimate relation between men and women. The lovers love the game of love 'the chase'. They want to continue the game of love up to the very end. The dramatists make fun of marriage. Love is all right but marriage is a dreaded calamity. In *The Way of the World* we find all these things. Millamant loves Mirabell but is most reluctant to get married. She can marry him if he agrees to give her full liberty even after the marriage. Here marriage has been treated as bargain.

The characters in the comedy of manners are of a set pattern. They are largely types. Sometimes their names show their characteristics. In such comedies we find fops and gallants in the company of gay ladies and butterflies of fashions. We find giddy

girls, lustful women, deceived, jealous and impotent husbands. Fops and ladies spend their time to conspire against their rivals in love. Here the charming heroine marries the rake that shows signs of becoming better. In *The Way of the World* we get characters of this type. They belong to the upper strata of the society. Mirabell has had an affair with a young widow. But he persuades her to marry Fainall. After her marriage she has soft corner for Mirabell. Fainall marries her only to get her property. Behind her he flirts with Mrs. Marwood. Millamant loves Mirabell but she has soft corner for Petulant and Witwoud. In spite of her old age, Lady Wishfort wants to marry some young man. She uses cosmetics to hide her faded beauty and her wrinkles. Thus *The Way of the World* is a true comedy of manners.

Love intrigues occupy an important place in the plot of comedy of manners. It is the major theme of the play. *The Way of the World* follows this convention. The entire play deals with the intrigues of Mirabell to gain the hand of Millamant. To achieve his aim, he pretends to make love to Lady Wishfort, an aged lady. When he fails, he hatches a deeper plot. At any cost Lady Wishfort wants to have a husband. Thus he gets her servant married to Lady Wishfort's maidservant. Thus here we find love intrigue. On this basis we can say that this is a beautiful comedy of manners.

Thus *The Way of the World* is a fine comedy of manners. It has all the important characteristics of it. Here Congreve has introduced intrigues and illicit love. But his dialogue has wit. On the whole this play is a faithful reflection of the upper class life of the day. The characters are well drawn. Its prose is lucid and pointed.

Congreve is undoubtedly the greatest of the Restoration comedy writers. In *The Way of the World* the comedy of manners has reached at its perfection.

