

Way of the World by William Congreve

As we have already discussed the Prologue and a few scenes from Act 1, now we will look at the entire Act 1 in totality.

I have presented below the summary of the entire act along with its analysis

I have also attached a secondary reading in form of a Jstor essay, kindly read the essay and share your doubts regarding it through email or WhatsApp. If there is anything which you are not able to comprehend within the notes and Jstor essays, kindly get in touch with me. I will be more than happy to help.

Email: kumar.ranbeer@gmail.com

WhatsApp: 9999888392

Contact Number: 999988892

Secondary readings: Jstor essay

1) Thematic Development in the Comedies of William Congreve: The Individual in Society (Refer from page 15 onwards)

This reading would help you in answering previous year question which is as follows:

Q) Bring out fully the implications of the phrase “the way of the world” in Congreve’s play of that name?

Way of the World by William Congreve

Act 1 scene 1 opens with Mirabell and Fainall in conversation at a chocolate-house, attended upon by a server named Betty. Mirabell has lost to Fainall in the game of cards, and because Mirabell seems to have lost interest in playing further the two men turn to conversation.

Fainall is annoyed by Mirabell's reserved mood and presumes that Mirabell fought with his love interest, Millamant (also Fainall's cousin), the previous night. Mirabell admits that when he arrived at the "cabal" night, both Millamant and her "evil genius" aunt, Lady Wishfort, asked him to leave. Mirabell feels further annoyed that even though the parties are little more than women's gossip sessions, some men, including Petulant and Witwoud, have been allowed to attend. When Mirabell showed up, the women "put on their grave faces, whispered one another ... [and] fell into a profound silence." Mirabell and Fainall discuss why Lady Wishfort dislikes Mirabell as a suitor for her niece, Millamant, whose fortune she controls. To conceal his love for Millamant, Mirabell had flattered Millamant and Wishfort equally. Embarrassed to have been fooled, Wishfort now retaliates by thwarting Mirabell's advances toward Millamant. Mirabell further suggests that Mrs. Marwood works to foil his romance with Millamant.

Mirabell asks a servant whether "the grand affair" is over. He appears to be talking about the wedding of his valet, Waitwell. The servant states that the couple is "married and bedded," and he has brought the marriage certificate as proof. He also says that the tailor has delivered the clothes for Waitwell that Mirabell ordered. Before he dismisses the servant, Mirabell asks him to deliver a secret message to the newlyweds to meet him at Rosamond's pond.

Fainall returns and asks Mirabell why he's so pleased. Mirabell admits being "engaged in a matter of some sort of mirth," but doesn't reveal what. He asks Fainall whether he's jealous of his wife's participation in the cabal nights. Fainall says he has nothing to be jealous of because it's mostly women, and the few men who join are too "contemptible" to draw

scandal. Mirabell disagrees, saying "a woman who is not a fool can have but one reason for associating with a man who is." Fainall counters by asking whether Mirabell is jealous of the attention Millamant shows Witwoud and Petulant, her other suitors. Mirabell claims to "like her for all her faults." He expounds romantically, listing all his reasons for loving her—including her imperfections. Fainall tells Mirabell to marry her.

A messenger arrives with a letter for Witwoud. Betty directs him to the next room.

Mirabell and Fainall gossip about Sir Wilfull, Lady Wishfort's nephew. Sir Wilfull is "above forty" but still wants to better himself through travel, which the young men mock. Fainall describes Sir Wilfull as a country bumpkin who's "as loving as [a] monster" when drunk. Mirabell agrees that Sir Wilfull's best quality is that he accepts every affront as if it were a joke, viewing "downright rudeness" as "satire."

Sir Wilfull's half-brother, Witwoud, arrives, complaining about his "fool" brother. Witwoud asks Fainall about his marriage to "the best woman in the world." Fainall claims Witwoud's compliments might make him "vain or jealous," and Mirabell suggests Witwoud check with Mrs. Fainall before complimenting the marriage. Witwoud gasps at Mirabell's cheekiness. The conversation turns to Witwoud's friend Petulant, who is out on the town spending the money he won at cards. Mirabell and Fainall tease Witwoud, saying he can't have both wit and fortune. Witwoud defends Petulant, calling him honest and "pretty." Eventually, Witwoud agrees that Petulant will "lie like a chambermaid," often telling farfetched lies only because he's too dimwitted to think of clever ones.

A coachman asks whether Petulant is available, claiming three women in a coach want to see him. Fainall remarks, "O brave Petulant! Three!" The coachman requests soothing cinnamon water and chocolates for the waiting women.

Witwoud suggests that the three women waiting in the carriage have been hired by Petulant himself, claiming Petulant pays the women to follow him around town requesting his company. He goes on to claim that Petulant concocts various plots to make himself look more popular, saying that Petulant would slip away from the chocolate house "as soon as your back was turned," run back to his lodging, put on a disguise, then return to the chocolate house and "call for himself," sometimes even leaving a letter for himself. Mirabell delights in Petulant's "extraordinary" behavior.

Petulant enters, making a grand show of dismissing the women even if they "snivel and cry" in the carriage. The other men tease Petulant for his cruelty, and Petulant snaps back that the women were actually Witwoud's family—his cousins Mrs. Fainall and Millamant and his aunt Lady Wishfort. He further insults the dismissed women, saying, "anger helps complexion, saves paint." Mirabell jokingly warns Petulant that he'll "cut [his] throat" if he pursues Millamant, to which Petulant replies, "There are other throats to be cut." He insinuates that Mirabell's uncle has recently come to town and is interested in Millamant. Should Mirabell's uncle marry and have a child, Mirabell would be disinherited. Petulant claims not to know any more but later agrees to investigate further in exchange for Mirabell publicly declaring that he finds Petulant intelligent.

Fainall arrives and asks Mirabell whether he's worried about Petulant and Witwoud's flirtations with Millamant. Witwoud butts in, saying that he appreciates Millamant's beauty but he isn't seriously interested in her: "It is almost a fashion to admire her." Both Witwoud and Petulant claim Mirabell's uncle showed interest in Millamant at the party, although they are unsure whether the Millamant and the uncle met. To blow off steam, Mirabell invites Fainall to walk with him on the mall. Witwoud tries to invite himself along because "ladies talked of being there," but Mirabell insists that Witwoud and Petulant should stay behind

because their "senseless ribaldry" makes women blush. Petulant snaps that any woman who blushes at a crude joke shows herself open to "guilt or ill-breeding."

Analysis

The main purpose of these opening scenes is to set the stage for the action to come. The primary conflict of the play revolves around Lady Wishfort's disapproval of Millamant and Mirabell's relationship. As a charming, handsome bachelor, Mirabell overplayed his hand by flirting too much with Lady Wishfort, leading her to believe he actually loved her. When she discovered the truth, she was so embarrassed that she banned him as a suitor for *anyone* in the house, including her niece, Millamant. Lady Wishfort's dramatic reaction not only characterizes her as a drama queen; it also hints at the importance of reputation during England's Restoration Period. *The Way of the World* is a comedy of manners, a timely piece that pokes fun at high society's etiquette and rules, which are dutifully followed by the upper class to preserve their reputation and control the way the others view them. Lady Wishfort wasn't brokenhearted about Mirabell's lack of love for her. She was embarrassed that people would view her as an eager, foolish older woman. Her reputation was damaged, so she lashed out, which motivates the action of the play. Further evidence of the importance of reputation comes with the introduction of Sir Wilfull's character. As Lady Wishfort's nephew, Sir Wilfull could enjoy some version of an aristocratic life, but he prefers to live by simpler means. Mirabell and Fainall gossip brutally about Sir Wilfull, calling him a country bumpkin who is beneath them and a fool for wanting to better himself through travel. Similarly, by the end of this section, it's clear Mirabell and Fainall are not friends. Just as they are competitors in card games, they will "compete" to win

Millamant's inheritance. In these early scenes the men ask prodding questions and make innuendoes in an attempt to garner information about each other. The expectation of social niceties and the need to follow the rules of etiquette prevent the men from asking pertinent questions outright, so they must mask their questions using sarcasm and wit to move the play along.

These early scenes also help characterize society at the time. The main players belong to the aristocratic upper class, and they maintain their daily lives through the service of their staff, including ladies' maids like Foible and Mincing and valets like Waitwell. Men and women often spend their social time separately, as with the men playing cards at the chocolate house and the women meeting for gossip sessions on cabal nights. "Cabals" are secret meetings where plots are hatched, but the women meet to discuss the "murdered" reputations of fellow society members, once again highlighting the importance of reputation during the Restoration Period.

The popularity of cabals—Mirabell feels offended not to be included—highlights the general importance of intrigue in the play. Characters wear masks, hide their identities, and plot against each other to jockey for better positions within strict social expectations. When Fainall suggests he needn't be jealous of male attendants at cabal nights because they're too stupid to pose him any threat, Mirabell warns that "the greater the coxcomb, always the more the scandal," suggesting the ever presence of manipulation and rumor. Essentially, Mirabell is saying it wouldn't surprise him if the men feigned ignorance to get what they want: time alone with beautiful women.

Much of this section surrounds the comedic characterization of Petulant, one of Millamant's insignificant suitors. The primary purpose for introducing characters like Petulant and Witwoud is their comedic value, but the two characters also provide important foils

for Mirabell. The characters names, Witwoud and Petulant, describe the two main characteristics of the men in Congreve's Restoration Period. They are childish ("Petulant") and lack intelligence ("Witwoud"). When surrounded by vain, dim-witted, crass competition, a man with charm and wit—like Mirabell—stands out as a more desirable match. In Scene 6, the audience sees a direct match of wit between Mirabell and Witwoud, with Witwoud bumbling incoherently through the conversation, constantly forgetting what he was going to say; he is clearly no match for Mirabell. Similarly, Petulant's ridiculous ploys to make himself appear popular and promiscuous, offers comparison for audiences to appreciate the sophistication of Mirabell's schemes.

Scenes 7–9 present a comedic scene of Petulant trying to fool his friends into thinking he's more popular than he actually is. As noted, reputation was of utmost importance during the Restoration Period, and Petulant wants to build one based on popularity. But as Witwoud points out, Petulant lacks the wit to concoct believable lies. He tries to convince the men that the three women in the carriage are his lovers. His brash command to dismiss the women even if they "snivel and cry their hearts out" highlights his ridiculous bravado and hints at the poor treatment of women in this era. Men have the freedom to explore sexuality, but women who do are regarded as "whores" who are used up and discarded. The imbalance of sexual freedom and social expectations for women's behavior will be explored more deeply in later scenes, but audiences are reminded of the male view through Petulant's closing line: "I take the blushing either for a sign of guilt or ill-breeding." He references his own bawdiness, suggesting that it would be the woman's fault should she be offended because any upstanding girl would have the "modesty" and good manners of a chaste mind. Petulant's cruel comments about the women's appearances—"anger helps complexion, saves paint"—further contrasts him with Mirabell, who delivered a romantic monologue in Scene 3 about his love for Millamant. When it becomes clear that the men don't buy Petulant's lie, he lashes out,

essentially saying he slept with Millamant, Lady Wishfort, *and* Mrs. Fainall. Moments like this prove his petulance and further contrast him with the genteel Mirabell.

In the play, there's always deeper meaning hiding beneath the conversation. Mirabell's offhand comment that Witwoud should speak to Mrs. Fainall before praising her marriage suggests an unhappy union. Such a statement shocks Witwoud for its boldness and for its cutting edge. Even though Mirabell disguises the barb as a joke, he dares to break the protocol of social niceties to shame Fainall in public.

Work cited: "The Way of the World Study Guide: Course Hero." *The Way of the World Study Guide* | Course Hero, www.coursehero.com/.