

## PLOT CONSTRUCTION OF *THE WAY OF THE WORLD*.

*The Way of the World* is written with an almost perfect neo-classical precision. The plot construction adheres to the four-part formula of protasis (exposition of characters and situation), epitasis (development of complications), catastasis (the climactic moment), and the catastrophe (the resolution of all the complications in the denouement). It also has a strong unity of time with the entire play taking place in a single day and a unity of action with the entire plot revolving around Mirabell. The only breach of classical principles is Congreve's deliberate violation of the unity of place. Act I is set in a fashionable chocolate-house to establish a sense of the artificial 'world' of the play. In Act II the setting shifts to St. James' Park, a fashionable Restoration setting. The setting is then shifted to the confines of a room in Lady Wishfort's house for the remaining three acts. The compression of time in the play results in a crowding of events and lends rapidity to the action.

*The Way of the World* represents the pinnacle of Congreve's achievement even though it was not successful on the stage when it was first performed in 1700, largely due to the play's complexity. Although the play has only one main plot and covers a single day, it is crowded with numerous events and intrigues. The plot of *The Way of the World* seems to follow logic of its own. Before the action of the play unfolds, certain events are understood to have previously taken place. Mirabell, a typical Restoration beau, is devising a secret scheme to win Millamant's hand in marriage, gaining her fortune as well. Lady Wishfort is opposed to this match because her vanity has been offended by Mirabell, who earlier pretended to court her although he was really in love with Millamant, her ward. Mrs. Marwood, Fainall's mistress, has revealed Mirabell's deception to Lady Wishfort out of jealousy, since she herself loves Mirabell. The problem arises from the fact that half of Millamant's fortune of six thousand pounds is under Lady Wishfort's control and will be given to her only if she marries the suitor chosen by her.

Act 2 is set in St. James' Park. Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are discussing their hatred of men. Fainall appears and accuses Mrs. Marwood (with whom he is having an affair) of loving Mirabell (which she does). Meanwhile, Mrs. Fainall (Mirabell's former lover) tells Mirabell that she hates her husband, and they begin to plot to deceive Lady Wishfort into giving her consent to the marriage. Millamant appears in the park and, angry about the previous night (when Mirabell was confronted by Lady Wishfort), she tells Mirabell of her displeasure in his plan, which she only has a vague idea about. After she leaves, the newlywed servants appear and Mirabell reminds them of their roles in the plan.

Acts 3, 4 and 5 are all set in the home of Lady Wishfort. We are introduced to Lady Wishfort who is encouraged by Foible to marry the supposed Sir Rowland – Mirabell's supposed uncle – so that Mirabell will lose his inheritance. Sir Rowland is, however, Waitwell in disguise, and the plan is to entangle Lady Wishfort in a marriage which cannot go ahead, because it would be bigamy, not to mention a social disgrace (Waitwell is only a serving man, Lady Wishfort an aristocrat). Mirabell will offer to help her out of the embarrassing situation if she consents to his marriage. Later, Mrs. Fainall discusses this plan with Foible, but this is overheard by Mrs. Marwood. She later tells the plan to Fainall, who decides that he will take his wife's money and go away with Mrs. Marwood.

Mirabell and Millamant, equally strong-willed, discuss in detail the conditions under which they would accept each other in marriage (otherwise known as the "proviso scene"), showing the depth of their feeling for each other. Mirabell finally proposes to Millamant and, with Mrs. Fainall's encouragement (almost consent, as Millamant knows of their previous relations), Millamant accepts. Mirabell leaves as Lady Wishfort arrives, and she lets it be known that she wants Millamant to marry her nephew, Sir Wilfull Witwoud, who has just arrived from the countryside. Lady Wishfort later gets a letter telling her about the Sir Rowland plot. Sir Rowland takes the letter and accuses Mirabell of trying to sabotage their wedding. Lady Wishfort agrees to let Sir Rowland bring a marriage contract that night.

By Act 5, Lady Wishfort has found out the plot, and Fainall has had Waitwell arrested. Mrs. Fainall tells Foible that her previous affair with Mirabell is now public knowledge. Lady Wishfort appears with Mrs. Marwood, whom she thanks for unveiling the plot. Fainall then appears and uses the information of Mrs. Fainall's previous affair with Mirabell and Millamant's contract to marry him to blackmail Lady Wishfort, telling that she should never marry and that she is to transfer her fortune to him. Lady Wishfort offers Mirabell her consent to the marriage if he can save her fortune and honour. Mirabell calls on Waitwell who brings a contract from the time before the marriage of the Fainalls in which Mrs. Fainall gives all her property to Mirabell. This neutralises the blackmail attempts, after which Mirabell restores Mrs. Fainall's property to her possession and then is free to marry Millamant with the full £6000 inheritance.

Evidently, *The Way of the World* has a complex and intricate plot. When we go through the comedy, we find a number of relationships prevailing among different characters. Everybody is related to everyone in some or other respect. We see that Lady Wishfort is the aunt of Sir Wilfull. She also has the same relation with Witwoud. Further it can be noticed that Sir Wilfull and Witwoud are the sons of same mother but from different fathers and in this way they are half-brothers. Again, the heroine of the play, Millamant, is the niece of Lady Wishfort and half of her fortune is under the trusteeship of her aunt. Again we find that Millamant is related with Mrs. Fainall and Mr. Fainall also because Mrs. Fainall is the daughter of Lady Wishfort. Hence when Mrs. Fainall faces adverse circumstances in the play, Lady Wishfort becomes perplexed. When we read about Mirabell we notice that he is virtually surrounded by women characters. He is already in love with Millamant but Mrs. Marwood also has a feeling of affection for him, though he hates her. Nay, Mrs. Fainall, in spite of being a married woman maintains relation with him. Such kind of relations among these characters create a confusion and complicate the plot to a great extent; though they also contribute to its unity to a large extent.

Contextually it should be mentioned that, it is the specialty of Congreve to introduce some interesting characters in his play who deliver witty and humorous dialogues. They provide a particular type of strength to the plot of the play. They are very vocal people and are capable enough to ridicule the follies of other characters. These types of characters such as Sir Wilfull, Witwoud, Petulant and to some extent Millamant make the plot lively and interesting to read. That is why it is well justified to affirm that in *The Way of the World*, subplots or small scenes are as significant as the play as a whole. Particularly, some of the scenes of this play, are the soul of the whole plot. The Proviso Scene between Millamant and Mirabell is packed with witty conversation. Readers can fully enjoy the effect of wit and humour in this scene. Similarly, the dialogue between Petulant and Sir Wilfull and between Witwoud and Petulant are rare examples of witty exposition. Another scene which adds vigour to the plot of the play is the conversation between Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall. Mr. Fainall very strongly reacts to Mrs. Marwood's behaviour and alleges that she is in love with Mirabell and similarly Mrs. Marwood threatens him to disclose his affairs.

Apart from these significant small subplots, there are some other scenes which are very important. Among these scenes, the behaviour of Lady Wishfort creates an amusing atmosphere in the play especially when she prepares herself to receive Sir Rowland, who is actually the servant of Mirabell. In the next scene we are amused when Waitwell in disguise of Sir Rowland talks to Lady Wishfort and displays a rare kind of wit and humour. So to conclude, as a whole it can easily be affirmed that the plot of *The Way of the World* is a little loose but not incoherent in its fabrication. And the main strength of this comedy is its subplots which provide vigour and vitality to this play.

