

Discuss the Themes in *The Way of the World* by William Congreve

The precise statement of the theme of a work of art is always a little unsatisfactory. The pithy sentence must omit a great deal; it always does violence to the whole work. Nevertheless, it is worth making the effort to determine a theme, or themes, in a play as a guide to study or analysis.

As a point of departure, it is valid to say that the theme of this play is given us by Congreve in the title, *The Way of the World*. All the events and characters of the play can be related to this central theme. The obvious criticism is that the same "theme" can be ascribed to unlimited numbers of other, and quite different, novels and plays. Further, Congreve does not, in this play, seem to take a consistent position. Sometimes he is direct, sometimes ironic; sometimes he deplores, sometimes he approves; at times he is amused; and most of the time his position is a compound of all of these attitudes.

To get a more satisfactory statement we might use a different approach that would give a better sense of the texture of the play. Most Restoration playwrights supplied their plays with alternate titles, or subtitles. Since Congreve did not, we might seek for the different subtitles that are appropriate. Each one would suggest a theme, although not *the* theme. These may put flesh on the bare bones the title gives us.

Love a la Mode

Certainly, the play can be seen as a dramatic presentation of varieties of love in the England of the year 1700. Central is the delicate handling of the love game as played by Mirabell and Millamant. They represent the ideal of the Restoration attitude, intense yet balanced, their love based on mutual esteem with no surrender of individuality. Contrasted with it are Mirabell's earlier and quite ambiguous love affair with Mrs. Fainall; the illicit love of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, presumably passionate, but wholly without mutual trust; the spurious court young Witwoud pays to Millamant; the direct and somewhat coarse approach of Sir Wilfull; and, at the opposite extreme completely, the aging and undignified longings of Lady Wishfort, vain, unrealistic, over-eager, desperate, and a little pathetic.

Love and Money

Such an approach is closely related to that of *love a la mode*, although they are not identical. In the world whose way is presented here, love and money are values to be taken into account at all times. The sincerity of Mirabell's love does not make him lose sight of the importance of Millamant's fortune. Fainall marries for money to support an illicit love; apparently the thought of marrying Mrs. Marwood without adequate money (however "adequate" might be defined) is unthinkable. Money is Lady Wishfort's sole hold over her child and her ward. Even the marriage of the servants is built on a promise of a handsome sum of money. This is the world's way. Love without money is an impossible sentimental dream, although money often corrupts what love there is.

A Gallery of Portraits

Congreve's statements in the dedication, the prologue, and the epilogue suggest that this might be a valid subtitle. Since it is the way of the world to put a premium on youth, Mirabell and Millamant stand at the center, representing all that is to be commended. Mirabell is the beau ideal: polished, poised, rational and balanced, witty and perspicacious without being what we might today call over-intellectual. Millamant is the belle: feminine, beautiful, witty, not prudish, but with a sense of her own worth. She has avoided the messiness and humiliation of sexual intrigue. Opposed to Mirabell are would-be wits, worthy but graceless bores, and deep intriguers. Opposed to Millamant are women who engaged in adultery and an old dowager without decorum. Every character reveals himself in action, and together they produce a gallery of self-portraits.

Jungle of High Intrigue

This subtitle would focus attention on some of the values of London society. Everyone is engaged in intrigue: Mirabell intrigues to gain consent to his marriage from Lady Wishfort, and this involves intrigue within intrigue, for he does not trust Waitwell. Fainall intrigues in turn. Everyone is involved in one or the other of these schemes — Mrs. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood, and the servants. Even Lady Wishfort in her willingness to marry Sir Rowland has a devious purpose — revenge on Mirabell. When Mrs. Fainall married her husband, that was part of an intrigue, as was his marriage to her. And as we see in the play, victory goes to Mirabell, not because of his virtue, but simply because he is the most successful intriguer.

Certainly all these possible subtitles, rather than any one, add up to the ironic commentary on society that is in the title, *The Way of the World*.