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**Topic: William Congreve's *The Way of the World* as a
Restoration comedy or comedy of manners.**

In the year 1660 Charles-II was restored to the monarchy of England after the age of commonwealth. That is why the age is called Restoration Age which started in 1660 and continued up to 1700. The comic dramas that developed during that period were called Restoration Comedies or comedy of manners. They grew up as a reaction against the Puritanism of Oliver Cromwell, the king of Commonwealth reign. During the age of Restoration, administration was under the control of such rebel courtiers who led a miserable life before Charles-II's return to monarchy. They wanted to live a luxurious life after getting into power again. This luxury included illicit love relationships, property intrigue, theatre-going etc. Theatres were closed by the Puritans during the previous reign, but Charles-II, after coming back to power gave patronage to the theatres and reopened them for all in 1660 after eighteen years. Having received the patronage the dramatists tried to portray the daily lives of the courtiers through their comedies. Another influence to the comedies of the Restoration age was the French comedies. As many of the courtiers had fled to France and spent a considerable amount of time there during the age of Commonwealth, when they came back to England they brought with them the techniques of plot and characterization of the French comedies. However, the English dramatists did not follow the unity of plot like their French counterparts.

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Restoration comedy is also known as the comedy of manners as it depicts the contemporary manners of the upper class society. It deals with the fashion, witty speeches, property conflicts, rivalries and love intrigues of the then society. The settings of most of the dramas are drawing room, coffee houses, parlours and streets. So far as the characters are concerned, we can find stock characters carrying the same manners and etiquettes throughout the drama. Types such as fops, fanatics, fools, conceited wits and imitators of French customs are to be found in the dramas. Shades of immorality and licentiousness can be found in the Restoration dramas. It came as reaction against the Puritanism of the previous government. The dramas are full of witty and ambiguous dialogues with an underlying social satire. Of course, the common theme of the dramas is love. The dramas depicted all the husbands as cuckolds and all the women as frail.

William Congreve's *The Way of the World* possesses all the features of a Restoration comedy that are mentioned above. This is one of the best intellectually produced English dramas of all time. Illicit love relationships, the common theme of a Restoration comedy, is to be found in many of the leading characters of the play, such as Mr. and Mrs. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood. Mr. Fainall married Mrs. Fainall, the daughter of Lady Wishfort, in order to get her property. He is engaged in an illicit love affair with Mrs. Marwood, who is in an affair with Mr. Fainall and Mirabell both. Marriages of the time were based on dowry and property. Same is depicted in this drama where we see primary importance is given to dowry in a marriage. Mirabell's love for Millamant is also guided by the intention of getting a good fortune of her mother, Lady Wishfort. The fops and so-called aristocrats are best represented by the characters Witwoud and Petulant. Witwoud, as his name implies, tries to court Millamant by his fashion statement and witty dialogues. Petulant, in order to make other gentlemen jealous of him, hires ladies and tells them to

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propose him in front of public. His favourite pastime is to pass comment on ladies in public places and make them blush. These two characters, through their manners and witty dialogues, create a lot of comic scenes in the play.

The fashionable gallants of the contemporary society used to go to theatre wearing fine dresses, accompanied by beautiful ladies; but they found themselves on the stage in the dramatic personae. Congreve's *The Way of the World*, as the title suggests, depicts the manners and fashions of the then upper class people. Almost all the characters of the play are showoffs and engaged in illicit relationships. Although immorality is a point of criticism in the Restoration comedies in general and this drama in particular, it cannot be avoided, because immorality was a part of the contemporary upper class life. Jeremy Collier in his essay "A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage" (1698) attacked the Restoration comedies. He virulently attacked Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife* and Congreve's *The Mourning Bride*. But Congreve's intention is not to promote immorality, but to hold a mirror in front of the audience so that they can find it among themselves and be a better person.

Please visit the following links for further study:

1. <https://www.bachelorandmaster.com/globaldrama/the-way-of-the-world-as-restoration-comedy.html>
2. <https://www.englitmail.com/2017/01/the-way-of-world-as-comedy-of-manners.html>
3. <https://www.sinifogretmenim.com/odev-arastirmalari/14103-william-congreve-and-the-way-of-the-world-as-a-restoration-comedy.html>

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