

## **Legacy Conflict in *The Way of the World*.**

A Comedy of Manners is named as such to call attention to one of its most central themes-manners, or social etiquette, and the comedy that can ensue because of the importance, especially to the upper class during the Restoration, of preserving one's position in society. As the play develops, greed is "the way of the world". One cannot live without money, but the pursuit of it often corrupts relationships. The central conflict of the play revolves around a sizeable inheritance and how it can be protected through marriage.

A modern organized society has two institutions whereby effective control can be exercised over every individual within it. One is the institution of wealth and the other is the institution of law. Money is power, the power to control. But since in the genteel society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century one did not work for one's living, money could only mean inherited wealth, and all the central characters of the play become vitally interested in acquiring it and the power that goes with it. The plot of *The Way of The World* is thus built, as Paul and Mirriam Mueschke have described it, upon a 'legacy conflict'. The three people who possess this wealth are Lady Wishfort, her daughter Mrs. Fainall, and her niece Millament; but control of this money rests entirely in Lay Wishfort and over the lives of others. But though money is power, it becomes an effective instrument of power only if it is carefully protected and judiciously handled. A fool and his money are soon parted; Lady Wishfort misuses her power and ends up by becoming a helpless pawn in the hands of more clever personalities.

Lady Wishfort's control over the fortunes of her daughter and of Millament was a legal control, and all the plots and counter-plots

revolve round the problem of the legal extraction of her wealth. Her legal consent to the marriage of Mirabell and Millament is necessary if Millament is to claim the 'money' of her fortune. A legal document has to have Lady Wishfort's signature on it before Fainall and Mrs. Marwood can wrest anything out of her. And in the end a legal document is triumphantly produced by Mirabell to overthrow Fainall and bring all his scheming plans to naught. The 'black box' acquires a symbolic significance in the play; it represents law in action- the one force that can keep the Fainalls and Marwoods at bay.

Fainall and Mrs. Marwood's greed casts them as the play's villains because they seek to steal what is not theirs. Fainall marries Lady Wishfort's daughter for her money, which he spends on his mistress, Mrs. Marwood. He concocts plots to blackmail Lady Wishfort out of her own fortune and Millament's inheritance, threatening to divorce his kindhearted wife should Lady Wishfort not comply with his demands. When his plans are discovered, Fainall remarks that "'tis the way of the world," suggesting that greed makes the world go round. Dedication to money with no love present would seem highly distasteful and unacceptable in the realm of the play; dedication to love without money would be difficult and impractical. Thus none of the play's characters live without some level of greed. Each makes decisions to protect, earn, or steal fortunes.

Congreve's "comedy of manners" takes the fashionable or conventional social behaviour of the time as the principal subject of satire as Prof. Bonamy Dobree says "Restoration Comedy is an acute mirror of 17<sup>th</sup> century society and, as such, is intensely realistic". Moreover, In this play all moral principle is risked for the sake of reputation and money. Congreve excellently portrays the 'legacy conflict' as the dominant aspect so far as 'The Way of The World' is concerned.