**Semester 4 CCT 8**

The Way Of The World

THEMES:

The play is concerned with the problem of social living and the theme is established straightaway by the title “The way of the world”. The phrase and its variations are repeated throughout the play, e.g. when Fainall says: “the Ways of Wedlock and this World” or when Mirabell mocks at Fainall by saying: “’tis the Way of the World, Sir; of the Widows of the World.” Man has to survive according to the dictates of the world he lives in, and therefore, he has no choice but to maintain and contain the health of the society by protecting it from disruptive forces and also at the same time, maintain his own individuality and personality. This challenge is met with great élan by Mirabell and Millamant in the play. There are two categories of people who endanger the smooth running of society- the fools and the knaves. The fools in the play are Petulant and Witwoud who try to outbid each other in affectations and are utterly worthless. But, the pair of unscrupulous lovers, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are most dangerous as they use all means in their power to gain their objectives. It is difficult to decide who is the more despicable of the two. However, one may wish that such characters don’t exist in society, it is not possible to get rid of all of them. To hope that evil will turn into good is to indulge in mere wishful thinking. The plot of the play is built upon a “legacy of conflict” as Paul and Miriam Mueschke contends. A modern organised society is controlled by the institutions of wealth and power. Money could only mean inherited wealth in the refined society of the 17th century, and, therefore, all the characters become obsessed with acquiring it and the power that goes with it. Lady Wishfort appears to be looming large over all the other characters as only she seems to have control over the wealth in the play. However, as we all know that money becomes an instrument of power only when it is effectively and judiciously handled. Therefore, Lady Wishfort is turned into a helpless pawn at the hands of mischief makers as she misuses her power. The power of the legal system in the civilised society of the 17th century could not be ignored, as it held the community together. The plots and counter-plots in the play revolve around the problem of the legal extraction of Lady Wishfort’s wealth. All the conspiracies of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are reduced to naught by the production of a legal document by Mirabell at the end. The black box, thus, becomes law in action and acquires a symbolic significance in the play. You must understand that Congreve has no idealistic illusions about life. We have to live in a world, follow the ways of that world, and use the weapons of the world at our disposal to combat evil and thus protect ourselves. People like Fainall and Mrs. Marwood must be met and defeated on their own terms. Mirabell and Millamant are the true realists of the play and represent the real way of the world, as they never acknowledge defeat however difficult the circumstances may be. Fainall is a loser and talks of an escape to “another world” when the ways of the world become too much for him. “(We) will retire somewhere, any where to another World” (Lines 226, Act II Sc i) Even Lady Wishfort proves herself an escapist when circumstances become too complicated for her to bear: “I would retire to Deserts and Solitudes, and feed harmless sheep by Groves and purling Streams. Dear Marwood, let us leave the World, and retire by our selves and be Shepherdesses.” (Lines 124-25 Act V Sc i) Congreve analyses from all angles how an individual while sustaining society can retain his own identity and shows how the conflict can be resolved through the characters of Mirabell and Millamant. The phrase “the way of the world” is always used in the context of marriage as the play revolves around the problems of marriage relationships. At the end of the play, Congreve emphasises the moral “That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind.” You will observe from your reading of the play that Congreve is not bothered with the excitement of falling in love for the first time, or the stages of love, but by the problem of working out a permanent and compatible relationship between people who are already in love or have been in love. It is a play about adapting and adjusting with people and circumstances and carrying out one’s duties responsibly. Much of what happens in the play appears to be the consequences of past actions and past misdeeds or follies. Mirabell and Millamant are the ideal pair of lovers and can be contrasted with the ill-matched couples, the Fainalls and Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Their love story pursues an independent course of its own, indifferent to the quarrels over property and wealth. Love can be sealed with marriage for them only when they come to terms with each other on the basis of mutual trust and honesty. Thus, Act IV becomes the crux of the play when the famous bargaining scene takes place. Congreve achieves the pinnacle of his art by the sheer depth of emotion and profundity of thought enacted in it. Even though Millamant is deeply in love with Mirabell, she is wary that marriage might turn him into a complacent husband, and reduce her to a mere wife, thus leading to a loss of her identity. She plays around with Mirabell and eludes him to a degree that leaves him in a daze. Her arrogance can be deduced from her haughty remarks: “Lord, what is a Lover, that it can give? Why one makes Lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases: And then if one pleases one makes more.” (Act II Sci) In the Proviso scene, even though Millamant admits to herself that “if Mirabell shou’d not make a good Husband, I am a lost thing; — for I find I love him violently” (Act IV Sc i), the two must face each other not as lovers but as rational human beings, because only reason, rather than emotion, can lay the foundations of a rock solid marriage. You will find it interesting to note that Congreve makes them use legal language, because in a society where the legal system holds its sway, the personal equation of marriage must also be worked out in terms of a contract. Millamant thus bargains for her privileges, her liberty, her right to privacy, and her freedom to meet whom she pleases. She will agree to marry Mirabell if “These Articles subscrib’d.” Mirabell, on the other hand, also has his own Provisos, and using the same legal jargon, lists his articles of contract so that he may be protected from the tyrannies of the women. The scene scores high on the brilliance scale because of its sheer artificiality, for no real man or woman will use such type of language on the eve of their betrothal. You will decipher from your reading of the play that Mirabell and Millamant represent the entire humanity and not merely themselves at this moment. The artificiality of the scene is more than a literary device. Human relationships survive on the basis of mutual give and take which involves self-control, intellectual discrimination and a sense of decorum. Congreve in his play reveals the great human paradox that art and nature must unite to create the artifice that is life.