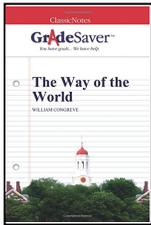


## Section Navigation



## The Way of the World

by William Congreve

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### The Way of the World Essay Questions

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**1. What does the title "The Way of the World" mean and how does the title foreshadow the action of the play?**

"The way of the world" is a flippant expression meaning the way people behave. However, in the Restoration times, the expression "the way of the world" connoted adultery, which was a common behavior in society and especially in theatrical Restoration Comedies. Therefore, the title foreshadows the importance of adultery to the plot of the play and the light tone with which it will be dealt. The phrase itself is used three times in the play - once in Act III and twice in Act V. In these instances, the characters also refer to adultery, often when gossiping to one another, calling the audience's attention back to the title and the fact that these events and their widespread nature are the focus of the play.

**2. Why do you think Congreve wrote *The Way of the World*?**

*The Way of the World*, keeping in mind Mirabell's climactic success, seems to satire social etiquette and society's focus on money and reputation but also laud those who succeed in these times. Mirabell, the closest character to a protagonist, fulfills the stereotypes of Restoration fops in that he is a womanizer, schemer, and money-focused, but perhaps because of his true love for Ms. Millamant he is allowed to succeed and even save others from woeful fates. To that end, Congreve has written the play like any satire to expose the humorousness of certain

societal customs, but he does not go so far as to punish those who partake in upper class society. The latter can perhaps be attributed to his and his audience's position in the upper class, as he also seems focused in the dedication, prologue, and epilogue with commercial success and popularity.

**3. What does the Restoration audience's reaction to the play say about society at that time? What does the play's contemporary success say about audiences after that time and about the play itself?**

Despite Congreve's focus in the dedication, prologue, and epilogue on audiences giving *The Way of the World* fair criticism, the play was not successful at the time. This is generally attributed to its bawdiness, with scholars noting that audiences felt the plot and dialogue gratuitously sexual. However, Congreve might also point out that audiences are quick to criticize, especially when they feel that the satire in a play is pointed at them. Because later audiences are able to feel more distant from the characters and context of the satire, this allows them to appreciate the humor and intrigue of the play, especially because society has become less prudish on issues of sexuality. However, the play could not be as successful as it has become if much of the satire (the focus on gossip, discussions of same-gender friendships, and the intermingling of problems of love, money, and reputation) did not continue to ring true in modern parallel.

**4. Does *The Way of the World* have a protagonist? An antagonist? Explain.**

The closest *The Way of the World* has to a protagonist/antagonist structure is Mirabell (and Ms. Millamant) and Fainall (and Ms. Marwood). However, this is based more on the rise and fall of the plot (largely driven by Mirabell and largely blocked by Ms. Marwood) and the happy ending following the success of Mirabell's new scheme in response to Fainall's demands. However, since *The Way of the World* is a satirical play, all of the characters portray parodied versions of societal faults, including the charming, womanizing, and manipulative Mirabell and the wealthy and beautiful Ms. Millamant who cares little for the feelings of many of her male suitors, tossing Sir Wilfull away when he stops being of use in the play's denouement.

**5. How do issues of gender affect the plot of the play?**

Gender is an incredibly important issue in the play, and each scene is colored by the genders of the characters in it. Both male-male and female-female relationships are fraught with feigned sincerity while rife with a subtext of deception and distrust, but male-female relationships are especially unbalanced in terms of power. Women seem much more desperate to hold onto their power through looks, leading to Lady Wishfort's long scenes of dressing and putting on makeup and the desperation that causes her not to see through "Sir Rowland"'s ruse. Furthermore, Ms. Millamant embodies the concept of women not having power over their finances, leading to their potential entrapment in marriages they do not wish to be in. Mrs. Fainall demonstrates the interplay of this disempowerment of women in the domains of money and reputation as her husband wields her adultery or current lack of love for him over her while he, hypocritically, has a mistress of his own that he seems unworried will ruin him as much as it may his wife.

**6. What is the importance of social class to the play?**

Social class seems to have two facets in the play - economic class and level of culture and/or education. Sometimes these two go hand in hand, like in the case of the servants Foible and Waitwell. These characters are working class and lack education, so they are bossed and manipulated by upper class people though these upper class people do not seem to have to work or be objectively better people to wield this power. On the other side of the spectrum is a character like Mirabell who is upper class, though always hungry for more money, and well-mannered and educated, as demonstrated in his witty repartee. However, characters like Petulant and Sir Wilfull demonstrate that one can be upper class but still not garner a good reputation because of an apparent lack of social grace or learnedness. To this end, social class depends upon many facets including job or economic status, level of education and social grace, gender, and age, and anyone that falls below the top of all of these is able to be manipulated and left scrambling for reputation by those at the top.

**7. Pick a character in *The Way of the World*. Is this character archetypal to Restoration Comedy? What do they add to the plot of the play? Are they humorous or tragic? Do their character traits speak to any major themes?**

Lady Wishfort, as a hyperbolically silly aged, upper class woman, is an archetypal Restoration Comedy character. Lady Wishfort plays into many of the show's themes, especially age, gender, and the importance of beauty and fashion to reputation. Though a humorous character overall, and left with a reasonably good fate after the show's end, her character does take on an element of tragedy from the point in Act IV when we watch the dramatic irony-filled scene of her interaction with "Sir Rowland" into Act V when she all but begs for mercy from Fainall who threatens to ruin both her and her daughter's reputations. She is integral to the plot, as she holds the money of Ms. Millamant's inheritance, which is sought by Mirabell, Fainall, and likely Witwoud and Petulant, which demonstrates that women can have powerful roles in society, but her manipulation by both of these men in Act IV and V demonstrate her lack of true stability because of her age and gender.

**8. If you were the director of a production of *The Way of the World*, what choices would you make regarding staging, costuming, scenery, and song/dance. How would these affect the meaning of the play and the reception of the audience.**

If I was given an unlimited budget with which to put on a production of *The Way of the World*, I would make sure that every element was as lavish as possible. This would drive home the decadence of the life around the childishly bickering and manipulative characters. Now that audiences are somewhat less prudish regarding sexuality, I would be sure to stage encounters between men and women that make clear their relationships, making sure that romantic conversations are held at close range and perhaps with some touching or kissing, while platonic relationships I would try to fill with more movement to keep the play action-filled. In the same vein, I would press the actors to perform their emotions broadly so that the at-times overly witty characters do not feel bogged down in words and rather are differentiated and made colorful for the audience as early in the show as possible. In terms of song and dance, since as it is written it does not seem to forward the plot greatly, I would use it as interesting interludes but not place any character or plot development on the back burner to it. Hopefully, with these measures, the audience would find the show's characters and relationships understandable, rendering the plot meaningful and enjoyable.

**9. What would you change in a modern adaptation of *The Way of the World*? Who are the Mirabells, Millamants, and Lady Wishforts of the 21st century?**

Because women and people of lower socioeconomic status are still subordinated in contemporary society, there are countless ways to parallel *The Way of the World* and adapt the play to modern audiences. Lady Wishfort's aging grasps for beauty might drive her to plastic surgery, perhaps even rendering her more grotesque each time we, the audience, see her. As for Ms. Millamant, her lack of power even with, or perhaps due to, her beauty and intelligence might drive her to desire to be treated, payed, and respected as much as a man she desires to marry, and her list of requirements for her marriage to Mirabell might include something like her being allowed to work even after they have children, splitting chore duty, and guaranteeing his support for political candidates that support women's rights. For the servants and supposedly lower class characters, casting selections and acting choices of race, nationality and upbringing, and linguistic style might be detailed to give commentary on modern social social divisions.

**10. How does the epigraph "Audire est operae pretium, procedere recte/ Qui maechis non vultis" or "You who seek retribution against adulterers will be happy to learn that they are impeded on all sides" foreshadow the plot of the play? Does the wisdom of the epigraph hold true in the play, keeping in mind the climax and denouement?**

Technically, the play holds true to this maxim since it says that adulterers will be "impeded" rather than "stopped." However, while the epigraph foreshadows the climax of the play, it does not give away the fact that a known adulterer and womanizer, Mirabell, will have success in the end. While other adulterers such as Fainall do not have such a happy fate - that is, without the riches he desired to extort from Lady Wishfort - he still presumably is left with a relationship with his mistress and power over his relationship with his wife. Thus, it seems that in this play, irony is created by the fact that adultery causes the problems of the plot but does not eventually cause tragic problems for the adulterers themselves, especially the male perpetrators.

## **How To Cite <https://www.gradesaver.com/the-way-of-the-world/study-guide/essay-questions> in MLA Format**

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## **The Way of the World Questions and Answers**

The Question and Answer section for The Way of the World is a great resource to ask questions, find answers, and discuss the novel.

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**Critically analyse the prologue of the way of the world?**

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**Why according to Mirabell do the people of the 17th century commit disagreeable and dangerous actions?**

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**the way of the world**

I think marrying Mirabell would affect the inheritance of her dead husband.