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KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Patgaon, Rani Gate, Guwahati-781017



SEMESTER 1

MA IN ENGLISH

COURSE 3: ENGLISH DRAMA: ELIZABETHAN TO RESTORATION

BLOCK 3: JACOBEAN TO RESTORATION

CONTENTS

Unit 12: John Webster: *The White Devil* (Part I)

Unit 13: John Webster: *The White Devil* (Part II)

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REFERENCES : For All Units

Subject Experts

Prof. Pona Mahanta, Former Head, Department of English, Dibrugarh University

Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami, Srimanta Sankardeva Chair, Tezpur University

Prof. Bibhash Choudhury, Department of English, Gauhati University

Course Coordinator : Dr. Prasenjit Das, Assistant Professor, Department of English, KKHSOU

SLM Preparation Team

Units	Contributors
12 & 13	Indrajit Kalita, Chaiduar College, Gohpur
14 & 15	Dr. Bashabi Gogoi, Tezpur University

Editorial Team

Content : Prof. Robin Goswami, Former Head, Department of English
Cotton College (Units 12, 13)
In house Editing (Units 14, 15)

Structure, Format and Graphics: Dr. Prasenjit Das

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City Office: Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati-781006; Web: www.kkhsou.in

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SEMESTER 1

MA IN ENGLISH

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DETAILED SYLLABUS

Unit 12 : John Webster: *The White Devil* (Part I) **Page :**

John Webster: The Playwright, Sources of the Play *The White Devil,* Act wise Summary of the Play, Critical Reception of Webster's *The White Devil*

Unit 13 : John Webster: *The White Devil* (Part II)

Critical Commentary of the Play, Major Themes, Major Characters, Webster's Art of Characterisation

Unit 14 : William Congreve: *The Way of the World* (Part I)

William Congreve: The Playwright, Act wise Summary of the Play, Critical Reception of Congreve's *The Way of the World*

Unit 15 : William Congreve: *The Way of the World* (Part II)

Critical Commentary of the Play, Major Themes, Major Characters

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In this Block, the learners will come to know about the practice of the drama in the Jacobean and Restoration periods in terms of two plays by John Webster and William Congreve. In the Jacobean period, there was a sharp decline of morality resulting in adultery, lust, death, sickness, hypocrisy etc. as the order of the day. Tragedy degenerated into melodrama and comedy into farce. In addition to subject matter and theme, post-Shakespearean drama experienced sharp fall in dramatic technique and language. The dramatists working within the ambit of the period were many including Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Heywood, John Marston, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont, Cyril Tourneur, Thomas Middleton, John Webster, among a few others.

With the Stuart rule that made its grand start with King James I, the Renaissance spirit of robust optimism, exuberance, enthusiasm and idealising the world gave way to high pragmatism and self-importance. Widespread political uncertainty and instability in the later years of Elizabeth's reign made people disillusioned, which continued even after the accession of King James I. As he was unable to rule unto the expectations of people, stark erosion of faith in monarchy came into effect. Besides, the rise of the Puritans turned out an important development in orienting the religious attitude of people. Although the Puritans never liked the authority of the Church of England, Queen Elizabeth with her shrewd administrative skill somehow managed their hostility. Hence, the notion of Elizabethan compromise became a popular concept. However, the concept ended in the 17th century, and taking advantage of this the pious Puritans trumpeted their reign. Things that were not permitted in the preceding decades started making their presence felt, indeed with impunity. Sensationalism and melodrama were the recurring motifs in the period. With the decline of morality, the society found adultery, lust, death, sickness, hypocrisy, cruelty as normal course of life. Indeed these practices were not absent from the Elizabethan stage altogether.

Much of major writing produced in the period dealt with such issues, and their impact upon concerned individuals. However, the social norm did not allow them, and would like to see them punished. In literary renditions too, they are punished at the hands of the noble and the good. The Jacobean socio-literary scene did not follow the path, and would express satisfaction at adorning the practice of mischief and cruelty at the earliest. With marked diversion from the Elizabethan period, the Jacobeans did not take upon subjects of national interest. What they were interested in was the accumulation of the French, Italian, and Spanish models in their pursuit of writing. Unrestrained licentiousness, melodrama, and cynicism were the order of the day, and there a growing sense of misguidance being conditioned by the

dramatic performances. If the Renaissance people gave major thrust upon deep insight into human nature, their succeeding allies were very keen in light-heartedness and superficiality. The theatregoers were seen viable to the immoral lessons, intended by the writers. Considering all this, the theatres were formally closed down in 1642. As the drama reached the zenith of popularity and perfection in the earlier decades, it failed to maintain the same position in the 17th century. As such, tragedy degenerated into melodrama, and comedy into farce. Apart from fast deterioration in subject matter and theme of interest, the post-Shakespearean drama also experienced sharp fall in dramatic technique and language as well. In contrast to the heyday of magnificent blank verse, widely practiced, most specifically, by Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, the Jacobean drama came out completely alien to the form. The highly majestic rhetoric of the preceding period dried out and the prosaic everyday speech gained much proliferation. Of course, the period made wide-ranging use of the masque as a distinctive dramatic device.

On the other hand, the term *manners* is most frequently employed in the phrase 'comedy of manners', usually referring to Restoration comedy (as practised by Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve), and sometimes by analogy to the work of writers like Oscar Wilde. These plays explore a universe where all values are bound up with appearances, where honour is synonymous with reputation, and truth identified with a glib tongue and a steady eye. The veil of conventions shields the action from anarchy and despair. By their success or failure at society's intricate play, the characters separate into true wits or gulls. They learn to live with the precarious balance of forces which govern the way of their worlds, as you can seen in Congreve's play *The Way of The World.*

Block 3: Jacobean to Restoration comprises four units, which are as the following:

Unit 12 & 13 will introduce you to John Webster's play *The White Devil.* Webster's *The White Devil* is a remarkable study of a famous Italian courtesan, which constituted one of the most preferred options for dramatists in the Jacobean period. In *The White Devil,* Webster has taken the life of Vittoria, an Italian courtesan, with a view to unfolding the rampant practices in the Italian court. Though Vittoria is the heroine of the play, she is also a villain, a devil, who develops incestuous relationship with the Duke of Brachiano. The growing relationship results in the murder of her husband, Camillo, and Brachiano's Duchess, Isabella. When the trial is commenced for her adultery, the corrupt nature of the judges is also brought into limelight. However, Vittoria appears influential with her superb oratory and defence, and she handles the proceeding efficiently.

Unit 14 & 15 deal with William Congreve and his play *The Way of the World.* Though not well received during its time, this play is the most finished of William Congreve's comedies. The play in question is

centred on the two lovers Mirabell and Millamant. In order for them to marry and receive Millamant's full dowry, Mirabell must receive the blessing of Millamant's aunt, Lady Wishfort. Unfortunately, Lady Wishfort is a very bitter lady who despises Mirabell and wants her own nephew, Sir Wilfull, to wed Millamant. Another character, Fainall, is having a secret affair with Mrs. Marwood, a friend of Mrs. Fainall's, who in turn once had an affair with Mirabell. In the meantime, Mirabell's servant is married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's servant. Waitwell pretends to be Sir Rowland and, on Mirabell's command, tries to trick Lady Wishfort into a false engagement. Therefore, the play, as you will learn from this unit, is concerned with the problem of social living, and Congreve exposes those problems so beautifully.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READING" list, which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know, the world of literature is too big and so we advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you should read the original texts of the writers as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 12: JOHN WEBSTER: *THE WHITE DEVIL* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 John Webster: The Playwright

12.4 Sources of the Play

12.5 Act wise Summary of the Play

12.6 Critical Reception of Webster's *The White Devil*

12.7 Let us Sum up

12.8 Further Reading

12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.10 Possible Questions

12.1 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss John Webster's life and literary works
- identify the sources Webster made use of in *The White Devil*
- make a summary of the play
- discuss the place John Webster enjoyed as a playwright

12.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of this Block, and it provides a discussion of Jacobean drama through Webster's play *The White Devil*. As a playwright, John Webster stood tall among the post-Shakespearean dramatists. The eminent critic, T.S. Eliot expressed high regards for Webster's poetic acumen, a development that successfully stood the test of time. But, tenderness and pleasant sympathy of the Shakespearean type seems to be missing from Webster's writing. On the contrary, he attained enviable height in unfolding the morbid and gloomy aspect of life. Little known to cheerfulness, he experienced melancholy and pessimism as an offshoot of the conflict between the old and the new. As rapid change was the order

of the day, he witnessed old values losing their ground, and the new ones gaining momentum. To Webster, the process brought in devastating and alarming impact upon conventional belief system. This resulted in deep pessimism, something that really matters in his plays. By the end of this unit, you will be able to discuss the life and works of Webster besides being able to explore the different important aspects of the play *The White Devil*.

12.3 JOHN WEBSTER: THE PLAYWRIGHT

It is unfortunate to note that very little is known about the personal life of John Webster (1578-1626). In addition to scanty record as such, the Great Fire of London in 1666 incurred irreparable loss in documenting the life history of the famous Jacobean dramatist. Hence, the dates given in support of his birth and death are sheer guesses. However, the research undertaken by Mary Edmond on the life of Webster entitled 'In Search of John Webster', published in "The Times Literary Supplement"; Dec. 24, 1976 has brought out a number of seminal aspects of the dramatist. Going by such findings and other records, we get to know that Webster was a son of a famous London coach merchant in Cow Lane, who was associated with the Merchant Taylor's Company. The name of his father was the same, i.e. John Webster, and he married Elizabeth Coates. Webster grew up in the noisy, densely populated parish of St. Sepulchre. His father's business provided him with the wider spectrum of London society full of commerce, nobility, and law. These things helped him grow many an insightful observation that proved elemental to his pursuit of writing. Indeed, it is remarkable to see him making comments that he was "born free" in spite of the din and bustle he was familiar with. This means that he led a unique life style, and could elicit the best of his materials.

Though not certain, he did his schooling at the Merchant Taylor's School, and later on in the New Inn, and the Middle Temple. Often his close rapport with Middle Temple is questioned, and much doubt is levied upon its authenticity. But his knowledge of law, and close connection with Sir Thomas Overbury, John Marston, and John Ford establish his association with the said institution. The trial scenes in *The White Devil, The Devil's*

Law Case, and in *Appius and Virginia* showcase the mastery he scaled in the field of law. As his prime interest was in the theatre, he grabbed the opportunity offered by Philip Henslowe. It deserves to be mentioned that his stay in the Merchant Taylor's School proved very effective in getting an edge to his interest in the drama. As the founding headmaster, Richard Mulcaster maintained a pro-active stance in popularising the dramatic form of writing, Webster got the required platform. The legacy left out by the illustrious alumni of the school such as Edmund Spenser, Thomas Lodge, and Thomas Kyd acted as an inspiration for a budding aspirant like Webster. It was in this school that he relished taste in the English language and literature other than the Greek and Latin classics. He was a voracious reader, who did not like to get his writings published. With his deep veneration for the native land, he liked to identify him as a Londoner. Although he wrote at times, his official recognition came in 1602 when Michael Drayton, Thomas Middleton, Anthony Munday and Webster himself were paid remuneration in advance for a play entitled *Caesar's Fall*, which does not remain until date.

It is interesting to observe that Webster's genius as dramatist showcased itself in collaborative works at the early phase of his career. As time passed on, he acquired courage and tried his hand in sole authorship, but with success. Be it in *The Devil's Law Case,* or the two tragedies, his real penchant for writing was well pronounced. In 1605-06, he married Sara Peniall, and their first child, John was born less than two months after the marriage. It is also known that besides John, they had other children including daughters, Sara, Margery, and Elizabeth. Their marriage life was happy. As there is less evidence for this, his high regard for family life with all its major aspects may be observed in his *The Duchess of Malfi.*

Webster's Dramatic Career:

Arguably, Webster was the last of the great Elizabethan dramatists. Though a genius as such, he is often criticised for limited scope of his dramatic writing. The pleasant sympathy and tenderness of the Shakespearean type seem to be missing from his plays, and much complaint has been lodged against the poor sense of structure, unbridled

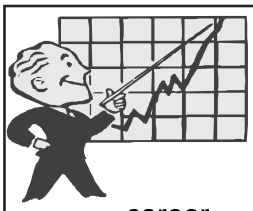
use of horror, and his ever-present inconsistencies. Indeed, these sides make an interesting reading, but they are not all-inclusive. Interestingly, Webster proved his position in the succeeding periods, especially for the romantics and the 20th century critics and readers. Be it Charles Lamb's influential study of his plays in *Specimens* or T.S. Eliot's high regard for his poetic excellence, what we assume is the greatness Webster did imbibe in his dramatic pursuit.

For convenience, Webster's dramatic career may be divided into three distinctive periods. To the first period, his apprenticeship and collaborative works are ascribed. The second period, perhaps the most significant of all, witnessed the two great tragedies, while the third period was meant for tragi-comedies. As a voracious reader, he became familiar with a host of writers, and tried to keep record of his reading. Very early in his career, he contributed to *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt.* It is worth remembering that he started his dramatic career through collaboration, and joined hands with a number of his contemporaries in a host of plays. Hence, he wrote *Anything for a Quiet Life* in collaboration with Middleton. Another close associate, Dekker had been a source of inspiration all through his life, and they wrote influential plays like *Westward Hoe,* and *Northward Hoe*. Dekker was so inspiring for Webster that he would like to continue their joint venture in other works as well. Hence, he joined hands with Dekker, Ford, and Rowley in the composition of *Keep the Widow Waking*. With Heywood, most prolific as he was, Webster wrote *A Cure for a Cuckold*. Moreover, Webster has, to his credit, *The Fair Maid of the Inn*, written in collaboration with Massinger and Ford. With his dramatic acumen, Webster expanded Marston's *The Malcontent*, indeed with much success.

The period of collaboration and joint venture was followed by two of his great tragedies, *The White Devil,* and *The Duchess of Malfi.* Here Webster is found to have inherited the legacy of the revenge tradition, but in a new look and treatment. In contrast to that of Kyd or Shakespeare, his is a treatment that is directed towards evolving the sympathy with the victim than with the avenger. With the 17th century Italy being a subject of interest, Webster capitalised the famous Italian courtesans in his writing. Indeed,

satiric portraiture of the court colours much of his dramatic pursuit in the period. It is worth remembering that dealing with Italy became almost a convention for most of the 17th century dramatists. Marston's *Antonio and Mellida, The Malcontent,* and *The Fawn,* Ben Jonson's *Volpone,* Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* are faithful renditions of Italy and different practices going on. Before these writers, Shakespeare also found Italy as of utmost interest in most of his plays. In *The White Devil*, Webster presents Vittoria Corombona, an Italian courtesan, as a devil, and much complexity comes up cantering her. However, she is not the only character corrupt in nature. Most of the characters do have unbridled passions of lust and ambition leading to their downfall and others as well. In his next venture, *The Duchess of Malfi,* Webster's growing sense of drawing sympathy with the victim gets an added edge. The widowed Duchess of Malfi secretly marries her steward, Antonio, and their act is punished by her brothers beyond imagination. Here the motif of revenge has become weak and fragile. What is significant is the feeling of humiliation the two brothers have experienced when their sister marries someone of lesser status and degree. In fact, the play is more durable because the plot is less chaotically framed. Moreover, the protagonist is conventionally sympathetic, and that is what most of the critics have pointed out.

The last phase in his dramatic career saw the arrival of tragi-comedies, but not of the height, he scaled in his tragedies. To this period, mention may be made of *The Devil's Law Case, A Cure for a Cuckold,* among a few others. What is striking in these plays is the rich pictorial beauty, and a close rapport with the art of a painter could easily be discerned. Enriched as they are in pictorial effectiveness, sensory experience finds its way to the readers. It is worth remembering that much of Webster's writing is like that of collage since he liked to draw upon ideas he came across elsewhere in the course of his wide reading. Like many of the contemporaries, he maintained a notebook or Commonplace Book jotting down his experience at different phases of life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Trace the three periods in Webster's dramatic career.

Q 2: How does Webster deviate from the Revenge tradition of Kyd and Shakespeare?

12.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY

It is found that Webster drew upon a great variety of sources while writing down *The White Devil.* The sources have made the play an interesting reading displaying the writer's wide range of knowledge and information. He also made some modifications and changes. His immaculate skill and unquestioned disposal of subject matter mingled with high poetic beauty have set up the sources in a manner that is simply unparalleled.

In prompt response to the reigning interest in Italy in the Jacobean period, he took upon the real-life adventures ascribed to Vittoria Accoramboni and Paulo Giordano Orsini, the Duke of Bracciano. Connected to the late 16th century Italian history, the episode formed an important source of inspiration for Webster. Of course, they are not photocopy renditions. As in *The White Devil,* Vittoria's first husband is Camillo, which is a novel addition since Italian history presents the name of Francesco Peretti as her husband. In the same line, Isabella's son by Bracciano was named Virginio, not Giovanni. Bracciano is also pronounced as Brachiano in the play. The prominent figure of Monticelso in the play is Montalto in history, who adopted the coveted title of Sixtus V on becoming the Pope, not Paul IV. Besides, in contrast to the play, historical figure, Bracciano took the life of Isabella because of her incestuous relation with a person, and the former died a natural death. Webster did not find it appropriate and showed Isabella's death as the consequence of a plot, and Brachiano as a victim of revenge. Even Flamineo and Marcello hardly bear resemblance to their historical counterparts, and they stand primarily as of the dramatist's invention. Cornelia's strong moral fabric of nature, Francisco's uncompromising

vengeance, and Giovanni's significant role are real markers to Webster's innovations, and the dramatic necessity as well.

Sometimes it is assumed that Webster misinterpreted Italian history in his literary pursuits. To validate this, critics point out the digressions he has made in *The White Devil* while making use of the sources. However, such an assumption holds little water, provided the innovations he has made in the play. It is true that there was less documentation of the 17th century Italian history, and much information was in circulation through gossip and discussion. Indeed, this was not the hindrance for Webster, who approached history not simply for its sake; rather for the sake of his literary endeavour. It was his constructive reading of history that reaped the desired result. In addition to the aforesaid source, Webster also drew upon Erasmus' *Colloquia Familiara* especially for the substance and some of Latin words and phrases as used by Lodovico and Gasparo. With his wide reading, Webster was unfailingly indebted to continental literature trumpeted by Montaigne, Monteux, Guevara, and a host of others. Moreover, Sidney's *Arcadia,* Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller,* Painter's *Palace of Pleasure,* Bignon's *A Treatise on the Election of the Popes* were no less influential in giving shape to the plays of Webster.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is the source of the play *The White Devil*?

12.5 ACT-WISE SUMMARY

Act I

Scene i:

The scene opens with a conversation among Lodovico, Antonelli, and Gasparo. Although the scene is short, it throws much light on the plight of Lodovico. Through his bitter experience, he says that fortune plays great mischief in the life of human beings. To quote him, "Fortune's a right whore/ If she give aught, she deals it in small parcels/That she may take away all at one swoop/This 'tis to have great enemies." Remarks made by Antonelli

and Gasparo are interesting since they point out Lodovico's inefficiency in sustaining the earldom resulting in his banishment. Lodovico wonders at the escape of powerful persons like Paulo Giordano Ursini from banishment. Antonelli gives words to do something for repealing Lodovico's banishment.

Scene ii.

Major characters such as Brachiano, Flamineo, and Vittoria are introduced here, and it comes to our knowledge that complicacy of action are not far away from the scene. Brachiano's growing weakness for Vittoria is illicit in nature since both of them are already married to Isabella and Camillo respectively. Indeed, it is Flamineo, brother to Vittoria, who inflames Brachiano's carnal desire for his sister, and extends his all out support to materialise the relation. With his presence of mind and eloquence, Flamineo makes remarks with a view to motivating Camillo go indifferent to his wife, Vittoria. Camillo seems to have some understanding in regard to Flamineo's intention, but of no result as such. The arrival of Cornelia, mother to Flamineo and Vittoria, throws much light on her personality. As an elderly person, she does not like Flamineo's wrong course of action in establishing an illicit relationship between Brachiano and Vittoria. She expresses sympathy with Camillo for the betrayal Vittoria has done to him. When she appears strong to Flamineo and rebukes him, the latter unfolds his past life, which had been under constant financial crunch. With his father dying a pre-mature death and failing to do something substantial for the family, Flamineo does not like to repeat the condition in his life. He wants to establish himself as a well to do person in the society, and for that he adopt every conceivable measure and avail opportunity.

Act II

Scene i.

Isabella, wife of Brachiano, seems tom have cordial relation with her brother, Francisco de Medicis. As Brachiano's growing weakness for Vittoria has become an open secret, the news also affects Francisco and his close associate, Cardinal Monticelso. When Brachiano arrives, Monticelso reminds him of the incestuous relationship, which the former denies in the strongest terms. Young Giovanni, son of Isabella and Brachiano,

shows precocity as far as his knowledge goes in regard to war fare and the skills required for running administration. However, almost the entire scene is unfailingly connected to the problems created by the rift between Brachiano and Isabella. It turns out interesting when Isabella experiences face-to-face contact with Brachiano. Despite her return after two months of sojourn, she fails to get warm regards from her husband, the underlying factor being Victoria's magic spell on him. Initially, Isabella does not appear indifferent at all. She says to Brachiano, "You are as welcome to these longing arms/As I to you a virgin." However, she comes to know his real attitude in course of the conversation as he speaks of divorce. At this, Isabella turns out strong, and expresses her resolve to deal tough with Vittoria. She holds Vittoria more responsible than Brachiano and intends to "…dig the strumpet's eyes out; let her lie/Some twenty months a-dying; to cut off/Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth." With his mischief and ever-growing loyalty to Brachiano, Flamineo wants to remove every obstacle to the fulfilment of his master's desire. As such, Flamineo sets plan to take the life of Camillo. Taking the chance of the errand by Camillo and Marcello, Flamineo plans the former's death that people would take as an accident. He also wants to accomplish the death of Isabella by hatching plans. He says to Brachiano, "He (Camillo) dies this night, by such a politic strain/Men shall suppose him by's own engine slain/But for your duchess' death-"

Scene ii.

Brachiano's restlessness in eradicating the thorny site of Camillo and Isabella is well pronounced. He meets a conjurer to see them dead so that his relationship with Vittoria goes along an even path. The conjurer introduces two dumb shows engaging the way Isabella and Camillo would meet their doomsday. In showing Isabella's death, Julio and Christophero take the lead role in poisoning the picture of Brachiano. As Isabella quenches her thirst in kissing the picture of Brachiano every night, Julio and Christophero poison it, and the act costs her life. In the second dumb show, Flamineo appears pro-active in pushing Camillo forward and breaking the neck, designed to be mistaken as the act of the horse.

Act III

Scene i.

Francisco de Medicis applauds Monticelso for taking initiative in the impending trial on Vittoria for her incestuous relationship with Brachiano. Monticelso finds solid ground to charge Vittoria with, and intends to bring the best of the lawyers. But Flamineo seems to be the least affected, and does not mind the discourse on Vittoria and her relation with Brachiano. In contrast to him, Marcello, brother to Flamineo and Vittoria, is much worried about his brother's role in continuing the said relationship. Marcello does not like his sister, Vittoria embracing an immoral course of action, and intends to act tough in this regard. He says, "Oh, my unfortunate sister!/I would my dagger-point had cleft her heart." Flamineo offers his justification, which is inseparably associated with profit-making zeal. He finds Marcello's service to the duke as something that is abject failure at mercenary gain. He says to Marcello, "…what has got?/But, like the wealth of captains, a poor handful/Which in thy palm thou bear'st, as men hold water/Seeking to grip it fast, the frail reward/Steals through thy fingers."

Scene ii.

In spite of accusations brought against her, Vittoria is hardly moved, and she defends herself in the strongest terms. With her indomitable courage, she protests against the move by Monticelso and the lawyers. In support of her womanhood, and denying the accusation, she says, "…to the most worthy and respected/Lieger ambassadors, my modesty/And womanhood I tender; but withal/So entangled in a curs'd accusation." During the trial, Vittoria's eloquence and presence of mind may be observed, and she succeeds in giving prompt response to Monticelso's queries. In fact, Monticelso is very tough dealing with Vittoria, and does not hesitate presenting her as a recognised whore in the society. However, Francisco seems to have been convinced at Vittoria's strong remarks directed towards establishing her innocence as far as Camillo's murder is concerned. Francisco says, "For my part/I do not think she (Vittoria) hath a soul so black/To act a deed so bloody." This is something that Monticelso finds difficult in taking for granted. Of course, he forgives Flamineo and Marcello

saying the lack of proper evidence has made them go scot free. As the verdict comes out that Vittoria will have to stay in a house of “convertites”, she simply ignores and terms it an act of injustice. After her departure, Giovanni, accompanied by Lodovico, meets Francisco and informs him of the death of hi8s mother, Isabella. At this, Francisco gets disheartened and intends to keep her fond memory forever or as long as he lives. To quote him, “…I am nothing but her grave;/And I shall keep her blessed memory/ Longer than thousand epitaphs.”

Scene iii.

Flamineo is dissatisfied at the course of action, especially when his master, Brachiano and sister, Vittoria are held responsible for adultery. As such he finds himself deficient in giving the desired shape to the relationship. His anxiety could be noticed as he says, “Would I had rottled in some surgeon’s house at Venice, built upon the pox as well as on piles, ere I had served Brachiano!” Like Vittoria, he also finds injustice in the way the case is handled at the court. Lodovico is amazed at Flamineo’s open support for his sister’s adultery. When Lodovico says something against Flamineo’s interest, the latter falls down heavily upon him and unfolds the former’s dependence upon the duchess in sustaining life. With his cunning nature, Flamineo asks about Isabella as if he were unknown to the turn of events. As he is informed of her death, he ascribes it to the role of fate in the life of human beings. To quote him, “O fate!/Misfortune comes like the coroner’s business/Huddle upon huddle.” Flamineo’s inhuman nature is very much pronounced when he hardly bears with Lodovico being granted pardon by the Pope. As Antonelli informs Lodovico of the Pope’s initiative in making him free of banishment, Flamineo tells them not to get rejoiced since there is no such provision in the legal system.

Act IV

Scene i.

The scene throws much light on Francisco, who appears resolute in avenging the death of Isabella, his beloved sister. Looking at murder, treachery, thefts, rapes etc. as the order of the day, he wants to bring an end, and this has established a sound image of him. However, Monticelso

advises him to have patience and wait for time that is ripe for action. Following Monticelso's direction, he prepares a list of knaves and ignoble persons, who are real threat to a stable society. Another significant episode in the scene is a long soliloquy by Francisco that reiterates his speculative mind to a great extent. Of course, his inner revelation also unfolds the course of activity going on in the city. Interestingly, the ghost of Isabella appears to him, but she says nothing to him. Indeed, he regards the ghost as a product of his thoughts that are not at the best category. Isabella's death and the misdeeds going on all around make him think a novel way. He says, "Thought, as a subtle juggler, makes us deem/Things supernatural, which have cause/Common as sickness." Perhaps the most striking aspect to his personality comes up when he makes candid revelation of his weakness for Vittoria. He says, "I am in love/In love with Corombona; and my suit/Thus halts to her in verse."

Scene ii.

Ups and downs could be observed when the letter by Francisco to Vittoria falls upon the hands of Flamineo and Brachiano. Although they have no knowledge about the addressor, the letter enrages Brachiano, who cannot put up with any rival to Vittoria. What he wants is the absolute control over her. Hence, the letter makes him think whether he is losing the hold. He holds Flamineo responsible for the turn of events, and behaves rude with him. To this, Flamineo says, "All your kindness to me, is like that miserable courtesy of Polyphemus to Ulysses; you reserve me to be devoured last." The course of action becomes more complicated when Vittoria arrives and confronts with Brachiano and Flamineo. As with Flamineo, Brachiano deals with Vittoria very rude and calls her a devil in guise of a human being. He uses foul language, and confesses the sense of loss he has experienced at the death of Isabella. He says, "Oh my sweetest duchess/How lovely art thou now!" Of course, Vittoria also does not appear as a silent listener. With her eloquence and presence of mind, she responds to Brachiano and reminds him of the dishonour their relation has brought to the society. She does not find anything positive in their relation. As such, she is very frank asking, "What have I gain'd by thee, but infamy?/ Thou hast stain'd the spotless honour of my house." She does not hesitate

pointing out Brachiano's immoral character, and it is an unsolved puzzle that he has played out with a number of ladies. However, it is astonishing to notice that Flamineo still wants his sister, Vittoria to go to Brachiano and avail the blessings of the dukedom.

Act IV

Scene iii.

In the wake of electing the Pope, Francisco is worried about Vittoria's elopement with Brachiano. The most worrying is the Prince Giovanni's union with his father, Brachiano. Moreover, Francisco finds Vittoria's elopement as a sign of humiliation to the country, and to him as well. As such, he orders the servants to get the Matron of the concertizes apprehended because without her help, Vittoria might not come out of the confinement. Monticelso does not support the pardon of Lodovico. He is astonished at Francisco's consideration into Lodovico's cause. However, through Monticelso's conversation with Lodovico, we come to know the latter's secret love for Isabella. He says to Monticelso, "Sir, I did love Brachiano's duchess dearly/Or rather I pursued her with hot lust/Though she ne'er knew on't." He is very resolute in avenging the murder of Isabella.

Act V

Scene i.

Much focus is given upon Francisco, who appears as the Moor by the name of Mulinassar. Shrewd Flamineo fails to understand the vested interest of Francisco, and the former takes the latter as someone seeking employment in the dukedom of Brachiano in the wake of the impending war between the side of Brachiano and that of the Duke of Florence. Speaking of the Moor's arrival, Flamineo says, "…he understands there's like to grow/ Some wars between us and the Duke of Florence/In which he hopes employment." Even Brachiano welcomes the Moor and employs him based on his commendable service record against the Turk. Brachiano places firm faith in the Moor, who is supposed to render the best of services to the dukedom. Of course, Francisco's revengeful motif is known to Lodovico and Gasparo. Although Francisco and his close allies move forward in orienting their vengeance, he does not find their approach to revenge as a

right one saying, “And yet methinks that this revenge is poor/Because it steals upon him like a thief.” Despite this, Francisco goes farther with his mission, and Flamineo reminds him of the service that the Duke of Brachiano would expect from him. Francisco appears more logical, and offers arguments that there is hardly a difference between him and the Duke. Flamineo’s cunning nature may also be noticed when he tries to persuade the Moor in regard to Brachiano’s half-heartedness in continuing his pledge. To reiterate this, Flamineo says to the Moor, “For I have known men that have come from serving against the Turk, for three or four months they have had pension to buy them new wooden legs, and fresh plasters; but after, ‘twas not to be had.” Of course, Flamineo knows that his villainy is known to Zanche to some extent, and it is by marrying her that he would like to access a safer position. However, this intention is utterly detested by his brother, Marcello, who calls Zanche a strumpet.

Scene ii.

Marcello goes against Flamineo in respect of the latter’s proposed marriage with Zanche. This offends Flamineo and enrages him to the fullest resulting in killing Marcello. Having killed Marcello in front of Cornelia, Flamineo showcases the extremity of cruelty. In fact, it is one of the most disturbing scenes in the play. Cornelia is heart-broken and expresses grief in immeasurable terms. Interestingly, when Brachiano asks about Marcello’s murder, Cornelia simply shrinks away from holding Flamineo responsible for that. In the meantime, Lodovico poisons Brachiano’s beaver keeping in view the vengeance that Francisco would take upon him.

Scene iii.

Brachiano experiences the effect of poison that has been applied to his helmet by Lodovico. As his pain is very acute that he could hardly tolerate, he forbids the rest of people to come near him lest they are affected with it. Hence, Vittoria and Giovanni are not permitted to approach him since he does not like to infect others with his poisoned body. Indeed, Brachiano is very much terrified at the prospect of death. He says, “On pain of death, let no man name death to me:/It is a word infinitely terrible.” When Brachiano is offstage, Lodovico appears at the scene and informs Francisco that

Brachiano has conferred the dukedom upon Francisco's sister, who is no more, till Prince Giovanni attains a mature stage. Giving a vent to vengeance, Brachiano is strangled, and looking at this, Vittoria smells the hidden agenda. She expresses her surprise saying, "Oh me! this place is hell." Flamineo says that he is a bad loser when Brachiano gives him nothing. Interestingly, Francisco plays with the sentiment of Flamineo saying that all this is an act of the Duke of Florence. To this, Flamineo says in the affirmative, and he expresses his angst. As Flamineo departs, Zanche arrives and makes a startling announcement. She informs, though late, Francisco of the murder of Isabella and Camillo. Here she confesses her guilt and the part being played out. "I sadly do confess, I had a hand/In the black deed."

Scene iv.

Though young, Giovanni does have understanding about Flamineo's nature. Hence, the young Prince wants Flamineo to say prayers and have penitence. "Study your prayers, sir, and be penitent." Flamineo takes it as a sign of humiliation and categorizes Giovanni after the nature of his uncle, Francisco. In the meantime, Francisco appears and talks about the pitiable sight of Cornelia mourning the death of Marcello. Having heard, Flamineo wants to meet them with Francisco saying this as the most uncharitable on his part. Cornelia, along with a few ladies, mourns the death of Marcello and wants to offer the best of garlands to the deceased as a mark of warm feeling. However, she does not forgive Flamineo, and thinks that the guilt of a brother's murder is still with him. Cornelia interrogates in respect of Flamineo, "…here's is a white hand:/Can blood so soon be washed out?" Flamineo makes a revelation of his troubled condition, and he finds himself as a disturbing fellow. His guilt at the murder of Marcello and his abject loss in the dukedom of Brachiano make his life full of pain and trouble. He says, "I have live'd/Riotously ill, like some that live in court." At the sight of Brachiano's ghost, Flamineo raises questions centering life and the experience whether the ghost has pocketed. However, Flamineo expects that all his loss would be compensated with Vittoria's sound economic condition. Unless she considers his case, he would prove himself deadly with her as time comes up. "…all these/Shall with Vittoria's bounty turn to good,/Or I will drown this weapon in her blood."

Scene v.

In this short scene, Lodovico entreats Francisco not to engage further in the course of action. He says that Francisco has already done too much, and hence he should leave the city. Lodovico also promises that he could quit everything and lead life free of complicacy. However, Francisco regards his mission as of noble stature, and would like to keep Lodovico's memory, if he experiences any casualty, intact. Addressing Lodovico, Francisco says, "I thou dost perish in this glorious act,/I'll rear unto thy memory that fame,/Shall in the ashes keep alive thy name."

Scene vi.

Showcasing his mercenary motif, Flamineo desperately wants Vittoria to give him a lion's share of the estate. Indeed, he claims the reward for his service, which he considers on a logical ground. However, the way he claims is almost a forceful approach that makes Vittoria take as an act of villainy. The situation turns out worse when he re-enters with two cases of pistols. Vitoria understands the intention of Flamineo, especially when he says, "I made a vow to my deceased lord (Brachiano)/Neither yourself nor I should outlive him." What Flamineo wants is the end of life. As he has not gained anything, he takes life as a failure. To this, Vittoria protests, and she calls him a "cursed devil", who hardly understands the meaning of life. Although death or end of life seems to have been given major thrust, Flamineo plays a game with Vittoria and Zanche, the objective being to test their faithfulness. For this, Flamineo gives them pistols that have no bullets. When they shoot, he feigns, but for a short while. With the trick, the ingratitude of Vittoria and Zanche is caught red handed, and Flamineo generalizes women as embodiments of treachery and frailty. Disguised as Capuchins, Lodovico and Gasparo reveal their identity, and also of the Duke of Florence. Lodovico appears full of scorn, and he goes mad in anger. "Oh, could I kill you forty times a day,/And use't four years together, 'twere too little!" Vittoria's fearless mindset is also to be taken note of when she intends to be beaten before her maid, Zanche's turn comes up. Her concern for Zanche is well pronounced. In quick succession, Vittoria and Flamineo die, and Lodovico reveals the secrecy of Francisco to Giovanni.

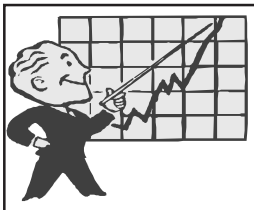
12.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WEBSTER'S *THE WHITE DEVIL*

It goes without saying that Webster's *The White Devil* was not received well at the early stage. Its first performance in the famous Red Bull Theatre failed to pocket due recognition, and Webster came down heavily upon the theatre and the audience. In the world of criticism too, the play did not fare up to the standard, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries. In his influential study of the play back in 1661, Samuel Pepys did not accord high esteem; rather he categorised the play as "very poor". The literary scene in the 18th century too did not accept Webster and his plays on favourable terms. Indeed, wide-ranging interest in the study of Shakespeare in the period failed to open up the eye to other writers. It was in the 19th century that Webster and his plays started having readership, and the process did not receive halt in succeeding decades. Thanks to Charles Lamb, who accomplished the trend in his famous, *Specimens*. Developing genuine interest, he found Vittoria as an embodiment of innocence to an extent that the said quality resembles boldness. For him, Vittoria's boldness is an offshoot of her innocence. Lamb's close associate, William Hazlitt also found Vittoria as "dazzling as the lightening". Another influential critic, Charles Kingsley found the title character quite interesting, and the reverberation of "sin and horror" in the life of Vittoria is what drew his attention to the fullest.

To readers in the modernist period, the play bears special significance. Readers as well as critics have found out vivid poetry and ideas, violence and pessimism, and the desolate world in the play quite interesting since they stand in close connection to the experience usually felt in the modern world. Hence, influential critics like T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, and F.R. Leavis have showered high praise for Webster and his writing. T.S. Eliot is very much straightforward talking about the high poetic genius of Webster, and his pre-occupation with the concept of 'death'. In a remarkable review, Kenneth Tynan argues that Webster's *The White Devil* has "no message as such", and the play deals with death as "harsh poetic

fact, not as sorrowful possibility." Here too, Webster's major thrust upon ambiguity and poetic treatment of death have been given due focus. Another critic by the name of Ralph Berry makes approach to the play considering the pattern as of "evil-doers and of retribution."

The Marxist critics in the 20th century have made significant study of the play, and elicited a few seminal issues relating to the ideology. Coming under this, Dena Goldberg takes up the character of Flamineo and sees him being "caught between upper class expectations and the realities of job market" in extremity. In the later 20th century, the play has made an interesting study along the critical schools of feminism and cultural materialism. Dympna Callaghan discusses the relationship between white Vittoria and black Zanche, and the sexual atrocities being meted out to them. Cultural materialist critic, Jonathan Dollimore is very much interested in power structures in the play, and their impact upon the life of individuals. In his eye, Vittoria and Flamineo are victims to the all powerful structures maintained by their respective authority. Though they offer service, they simply refuse to be sub-servient, and this is what inflicts pain on them. To justify its popularity, we may also refer to the Royal Shakespeare Company that took the play favorably in 1996. Even in the 21st century critical domain, the play continues to enjoy its day. As such, critics like Jan Sewell take upon the play dealing with various issues and aspects. Sewell finds the ambiguity in the play as an impenetrable entity and finds it hard to understand what is intended. Moreover, the critic regards Flamineo as a "typical malcontent" affecting many characters and their action.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: How was the play *The White Devil* received in the 17th and 18th century?

Q 5: How did the 20th century critics consider the play *The White Devil*?



12.7 LET US SUM UP

John Webster had to his credit the greatness popularly ascribed next to Shakespeare. His dramatic genius showcased early in the works of collaboration. He joined hands with Dekker, Heywood, Middleton, Ford, and Massinger in a number of plays. His primary reputation rests on *The White Devil*, and *The Duchess of Malfi.* Webster was a voracious reader, and had sufficient knowledge of the law. Though he wrote, he did not have much interest in publication. For writing down *The White Devil*, Webster drew upon wide range of sources. Based on the real-life adventures of Vittoria Accoramboni and of Paulo Giordano Orsini of the late 16th century Italy, the play also takes upon Erasmus' *Colloquia Familiara*, and much of continental literature. Webster's *The White Devil* is about the corrupt nature of people, who go oblivious to the basic tenets of humanity in the run up to fulfilling their nefarious agenda. Personal gain, betrayal, murder are seen as inseparable parts of people. You have learnt that, the 17th and 18th centuries did not come down favourably upon the play. It is in the 19th century that wide reception is made, and the process goes manifold as time passes on. In the 20th and 21st centuries too, the play and the writings of Webster enjoy the order of the day.



12.8 FURTHER READING

Bradbrook, M.C. (1980). *John Webster, citizen and dramatist.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Brooke, Rupert. (1916). *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama.* New York: John Lane Company.

Bush, Douglas. (1959). *English Literature in the Earlier 17th Century.* Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

Sensabaugh, George F. (1965). *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900.* Vol. 5. No. 2. Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, Rice University.

12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: To the first period, his apprenticeship and collaborative works are ascribed…. …to the second, can be ascribed his two great tragedies The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi… …the third period was meant for tragi-comedies.

Ans to Q No 2: Webster did inherit the legacy of the revenge tradition, but in a new look and treatment… …as opposed to Kyd or Shakespeare, his is a treatment that is directed towards evolving the sympathy with the victim than with the avenger.

Ans to Q No 3: In prompt response to the reigning interest in Italy in the Jacobean period, he took upon the real-life adventures ascribed to Vittoria Accoramboni and Paulo Giordano Orsini, the Duke of Bracciano. Connected to the late 16th century Italian history, the episode formed an important source of inspiration for Webster.

Ans to Q No 4: The play was not received well at the early stage… …Samuel Pepys did not accord high esteem to the play and categorised it to be "very poor"… …Charles Lamb found the character of Vittoria as an embodiment of innocence… …William Hazlitt also found Vittoria as "dazzling as the lightening"… …therefore the Vittoria was the centre of nearly all critical responses.

Ans to Q No 5: In the 20th century, Eliot praises Webster highly… …the Marxist critics Dena Goldberg takes the character of Flamineo as being "caught between upper class expectations and the realities of job market"… …cultural materialist critic, Jonathan Dollimore is very much interested in power structures in the play, and their impact upon the life of individuals.



12.10 POSSIBLE QUESTION

Q.1: Write a note on the practice of drama in the Jacobean period. Who were the major writers of the period and how they contributed to the enrichment of drama?

Q.2: What is your understanding of the dramatic genius of John Webster? How did he give shape to his writing habit?

Q.3: How did Webster's family life help him grow a writer? What are the three distinctive phases in his writing career?

Q.4: What were the sources Webster made use of in *The White Devil*? How would you justify the modification he made to the available sources?

Q.4: Write a comprehensive note on the plot construction of *The White Devil.*

Q.5: Elucidate the critical observations made by different critics on *The White Devil* over the periods. How does critical reception help us elicit the basic aspects in the play?

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UNIT 13: JOHN WEBSTER: *THE WHITE DEVIL* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Reading the play

- 13.3.1 Critical Commentary of the Play
- 13.3.2 Major Themes
- 13.3.3 Major Characters
- 13.3.4 Webster's Art of Characterisation

13.4 Let us Sum up

13.5 Further Reading

13.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.7 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an insightful reading of the play touching upon various aspects
- explain the major themes that enrich the play
- reflect on the major characters and their role in the play
- make an assessment of Webster's art of characterisation

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is a sequel to the previous unit. Webster's *The White Devil* is a remarkable study of a famous Italian courtesan, which constituted one of the most preferred options for dramatists in the Jacobean period. However, the early 17th century Italy, as treated by the Jacobean dramatists, was the embodiment of gloomy atrocities, and bloodshed, death, avarice, cynicism etc. were the order of the day. In *The White Devil,* he has taken the life of Vittoria, an Italian courtesan, with a view to unfolding the rampant practices in the Italian court. As the play is in line of the revenge tradition, here revenge is not presented as a bounden duty; rather as a passion. Though Vittoria is

the heroine of the play, she is also a villain, a devil, who develops incestuous relationship with the Duke of Brachiano. The growing relationship results in the murder of her husband, Camillo, and Brachiano's Duchess, Isabella. When the trial is commenced for her adultery, the corrupt nature of the judges is also brought into limelight. However, Vittoria appears influential with her superb oratory and defence, and she handles the proceeding efficiently. There is no denial of the successful portrayal of Vittoria, but the post-Shakespearean dramatic scene is proud of such a literary rendition. By the end of this unit, you will be able to appreciate and discuss the play in terms of its different important aspects.

13.3 READING THE PLAY

Webster's *The White Devil* is one of his most successful and largely anthologised plays written at the peak of glory in his literary career. The play makes an interesting reading since it convincingly draws upon a number of seminal issues and ideas, which are presented through various characters with an elan that is worth remembering. Apart from being a faithful study of an Italian courtesan by the name of Vittoria Corombona, the play seems to have given major thrust upon the reigning concepts of lust, ambition, power, betrayal, mortality, femininity, and family set up. Accumulation of these aspects has given much variety, and readers bearing different tastes are likely to quench their thirst.

While reading the play, it seems that the most preferred area Webster would like to concentrate upon is adultery or illicit relationship, which affected the sizeable section of people in the aftermath of Queen Elizabeth's reign. In this sense, the play was a due response to the background, or what time demanded. Of course, this has been done by taking recourse to Italy, a European country of rich heritage, Renaissance artefacts and culture. Satiric as the dominant note is, the play takes upon Vittoria Corombona, who is at the centre of showing adultery with the Duke of Brachiano. In fact, much action follows the relationship, and almost all the characters are impacted by this to a great extent. Here it is worth mentioning that adultery apart, there are scores of other issues such as

power, authority, ambition, revenge etc. that have attained new dimension, and they make an interesting study in connection with the most thrust area. For instance, centering Vittoria and Brachiano's relationship, Flamineo's ambition and sense of power and authority fabricate themselves in a new light. Truly speaking, this aspect to Flamineo could hardly be studied all alone. What it warrants is the close proximity it maintains to the main theme.

It is true that the play is in line of the emerging scenario of the early 17th century, most particularly its degeneration. This basic side is presented convincingly; there is no doubt about it. However, this is not an end in itself since the development gets a treatment reminding us of an attitude that is very much Elizabethan. Although the line of demarcation between good and evil is ambiguous in the play, evildoers are not allowed to have their free run. They are punished, and there is no excuse to them. Of course, their punishment comes late, and the misdeeds incur much damage and irreparable loss before they are addressed. The cruelty and hypocrisy of Brachiano, Flamineo, and Lodovico do not last forever because their death has made it impossible to enjoy the blessing or advantage they are madly fond of. But it is too late, and hence innocents such as Camillo and Isabella have to suffer the casualty. Whatever it may be, Webster's sense of poetic justice is not missing from the play altogether.

Most often complaint is lodged against Webster in regard to weak plot construction in his plays. The idea of a close-knit plot, which had been a major area of interest for the preceding Renaissance thinkers and writers, is not at its best with Webster. Such an assumption seems to be pronounced in *The White Devil* too since there are certain episodes that do not have much connection to the principal area of interest, and they have little to do with the enrichment of the plot structure. However, this is partially true because the superficially added episodes do not obstruct the usual course of action along what is intended by the dramatist. As such, the plot in the play does not deserve much blame as is usually thought of Webster's handling of it. Another significant aspect that draws attention in course of reading the play is Webster's mastery over characterisation. This accomplishment goes a long way in accelerating the pace of action. Almost

all the characters are beautifully drawn, and the weightage given to them relates to Webster's meticulous skill and technical excellence. Vitoria, Flamineo, Brachiano, Francisco, and Monticelso have been beautifully developed, and they serve an inseparable entity to the plot. In addition to this, the minor characters are also given much attention, and they are no less insignificant. Each of the characters has the distinctive part to play, which one can notice through one's reading.

However, the most important side that seems to be missing is the sense of humour. In the whirlpool of revenge, ambition, greed, adultery, betrayal etc, everything turns serious and grim. Though light-heartedness is not a defining trait of tragedy or melodrama, serious overtone may not be an acceptable development for theatre-goers and readers all the time. As we find in the writings of Shakespeare, there is a fine amalgam between seriousness and light-heartedness, which has been beautifully presented. Even in his tragedies, lighter touch is not missing. Of course, it is tactfully handled so that tragic effect is sustained throughout. Readers and spectators get different tastes, and this is what could not be expected from *The White Devil.* However, it is understood that the play introduces what we call horrid laughter, and the loss of genuine laughter or humour is sought to be compensated with this. This distinctive aspect has been well pronounced in a few instances. Brachiano's urgent need of clarification from the conjurer in spite of his presence at the proceeding of death to his wife, Isabella, and rival, Camillo; Francisco's interest in playing football with the skull of Brachiano after the former's encounter with the ghost of Isabella are some of the striking sights that provide horrid laughter in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Comment on Webster's engagement with the theme of adultery.

Q 2: Do, you agree that plot construction is not at its best with Webster?

13.3.1 Critical Commentary of the Play

John Webster's *The White Devil* is one of his most successful plays that consolidated his place as dramatist in the post-Shakespearean period. Given the popularity and dignity of fame Webster enjoyed, the play could be termed as a prelude to *The Duchess of Malfi,* another successful play to his credit. Customarily, the play is ascribed to the famous revenge tradition of the Elizabethan age and of the succeeding decades. To validate the undercurrent theme of revenge, we may refer to the revengeful attitude of Francisco, Monticelso, and Lodovico. While reading the play, we find Francisco taking the resolve to avenge the death of his sister, Isabella, and he succeeds in the mission. Monticelso also demands revenge upon Vittoria, the cause being her adultery and the death of Camillo. Even Lodovico has his grievances against Brachiano and Flamineo. All this constitutes major part in realising vengeance the characters go through. However, the revenge as articulated in the play does not seem to be of the type produced in the earlier decades. In Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* or Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus, Hamlet*, among others, revenge has its own religion or ethics that hardly reverberates in Webster's *The White Devil.* Francisco has the justification to avenge the death of Isabella, but his ambiguous relationship with the sister, and extensive help from equally corrupt Lodovico and Gasparo in fructifying the revenge appear critical of the ethical dimension of the said motif. Similarly, Monticelso's vengeance against Vittoria is more of social rank and gender question than of a serious concern at adultery or the death of Camillo. As we observe that Vittoria is not the only person responsible for her first husband's death; indeed other people, especially Brachiano are more active in this regard. Holding the trial meant for the inflicting punishment on Vittoria is partial in nature. Lodovico's grievances against Brachiano and Flamineo are more personal having much to do to his weighty expectation and its least consideration.

The play is titled, undoubtedly, after Vittoria Corombona, regarded as a devil in white complexion. Usually, the devil is attributed to the black, which is a recurring motif in the European and American socio-cultural set up. Here, Webster is an exception seeking to show devilish nature in people without following conventional code and assumption. However, as the title goes, Vittoria is not the only devil in the play; rather she acts a part of the larger spectrum of people equally mischievous, malevolent or what is popularly called devils. We see Brachiano, Flamineo, Monticelso, and Lodovico continuing a life of adultery, greed, partiality, selfishness etc. inflicting much pain on others. Without their part, the attribute of a devil as given to Vittoria appears half-hearted. They make her life act the way that is hardly permissible in a civilized society. Indeed, she is a victim to a pre-eminently male-dominating structure mostly articulated through Monticelso. The devilish nature of most of the male characters is more pronounced than that of Vittoria. In this connection, one may remember that most often women characters in Webster's plays are treated as commodity, and they are expected to have endurance and patience while attending the company of men. In *The Duchess of Malfi,* the title character speaks of endurance, not of complaint. Although Vittoria is feistier, and she defends her with strength and vehemence in the trial scene, she cannot stand the test of circumstances conditioned by the male members, especially Flamineo and Monticelso. Isabella and Cornelia too are not presented favourably. Isabella's meekness, and Cornelia's favouritism and mercenary motif fail to cut a decent image of these women.

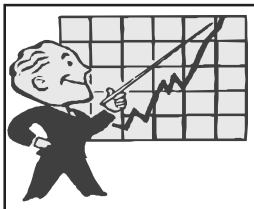
It is interesting to note that the play is a microcosm of Italy with people being drawn from a great variety of professions in the country. As such, aristocrats, churchmen, courtesans, and courtiers throng the play, and they provide different tastes with readers and theatregoers. What is striking about these people is that they maintain their stance as permissible within the bounds of their class. As long as they carry out the norms and cultural baggage, everything

turns good and acceptable. Once the set pattern is sidelined or challenged, complicacy arises, indeed in impunity. This happens to Vittoria and Flamineo, and they face the consequence. When Vittoria is accused of adultery, and held guilty of Camillo's death, she extends strong defense and points out the faulty system of judgment. Doing this, she challenges a set pattern that is simply unruly and unjust. This makes the concerned authority go mad, and Vittoria is made subject to the position of "convertites" as a measure of punishment. Although Flamineo acts as villain and makes every conceivable effort to turn the relation between Brachiano and Vittoria a reality, he also perishes in the process. Everything is set for Flamineo, and he has to lead life within the bounds. But he surpasses the limits when he tries heart and soul to undo his economic impairment. Is fact, he is expected to sustain the condition he has been placed upon so long. Of course, his approach to addressing the present condition itself is not sound, which also has its part in his downfall. What we notice is a strong structure that conditions human life along an expected path, and those who transcend or challenge are punished.

Another significant aspect worth mentioning is the unhealthy image of the Popish authority the play has convincingly presented. As the setting is Italy, and much action takes place near Rome, an established hub of the Pope, it is natural to get the action impacted by the all- powerful institution. This is what Cardinal Monticelso has been assigned to in the play. It is true that the scenes relating to Monticelso give the touch of a public figure in the otherwise family play. Each of the characters is more concerned with personal matter. However, Monticelso has nothing personal to gain. Unfailingly, he acts a public figure, which is connected to the Popish authority. In close association with Francisco, he implements the authoritarian stance, and his role is more pronounced in the trial scene. Taking adultery between Vittoria and Brachiano, and Camillo's murder as core issues, Monticelso is found more opposed to Vittoria, something that goes along gender bias as permeated through the Church

authority. His recourse to partial judgment brings down the image of the authority, and Webster's satiric stance in addressing the case turns out more visible. In addition to this play, Webster's other master piece, *The Duchess of Malfi,* also presents the coarse and cruel nature of the Cardinal. The sight of the Duchess being strangled by the Cardinal's murderers is quite alarming. The Cardinal in *The Duchess of Malfi* is more uncompromising than Monticelso in *The White Devil.* However, in both the cases, the Cardinals appear inhuman, and it is an irony that their position meant for the well-being of humanity does the opposite, most often resulting in its extremity.

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is more durable than his *The White Devil*, because the plot of the former is less chaotically framed, and this has posed doubt about the serious complaint lodged by critics against his poor plot construction. Of course, *The White Devil* is somehow missing the edge of the later play. Most of the episodes do not seem consonant with what the title suggests or stands for. If we follow the significance of the title, there is very little resemblance to be gained when consideration is accorded to the course of action. The villainy or devilish nature of most of the male characters seems more redundant than that of Vittoria, which goes against the significance of the title. However, the play has reached the public especially for critiquing corruption in the elite class, and presenting characters in their ambiguity. In addition, the linguistic quality enriched in images of animals, plants, money etc, is an added charm. Webster's high poetic acumen and excellence in artistry seem to have compensated the void as perceived in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Can we take Vittoria to be an essentially devilish character?

Q 4: In what way, does the play provide a microcosm of Italy?

13.3.2 Major Themes

Webster's *The White Devil* comprises a number of themes that make the play quite interesting. Taking a close look at the themes, we may discern the great variety of tastes that Webster intended to provide with fond readers and theatregoers. Let us discuss each of the themes embedded in the play.

***Revenge**:*

Revenge is one of the most dominant themes in the play. In fact, Webster wanted to follow the famous revenge tradition that enjoyed its peak of height in the preceding decades. Though the play is not woven completely along the mark of genuine revenge tradition, there are certain episodes that pin up the fabric of revenge throughout. Hence, we may refer to secret murders of harmless persons, ghostly visitation, feigned madness, and the devastating final scene as some of the recurring features that stand close to the revenge tradition. Much action takes place under the pall of vengeance that most of the characters like to follow. Francisco takes the resolve to avenge the death of his sister, Isabella, and he is successful. He has the right cause to take up the action, but his close entanglement to mischievous Lodovico and Gasparo does not seem favourable. Even the ghosts of Isabella and Brachiano appear to Francisco and Flamineo respectively reminding them of the urgency in taking revenge. Earlier before her death, Isabella demands divorce from Brachiano when she comes to know his adultery with Vittoria. Indeed, Isabella's developing mindset is largely conditioned by her vengeance at illegitimate relationship. The revenge as pursued by most of the characters results in much casualty. However, the dramatic curve gets an edge as the revengeful attitude of the characters gets realised.

***Ambition and power**:*

Ambition and power is another important theme in the play. Though they are different in nature, they appear as inseparable

entities, provided the concerned take recourse to them. When we read the play, it is Flamineo who manipulates the action in accordance with his vested interests. He cuts his image as an ambitious personality, and tries to undo the financial disparity he has experienced over the years. Behind financial gain, his is a motif unfailingly related to taking hold of power. For him, sound financial condition is a prelude to quench one's thirst in a given socio-political set up. Like Flamineo, Francisco's close ally, Lodovico also turns out a power monger. By giving all out support to Franciso, he tries to undo the dark chapter of banishment and loss of power. That is why he comes out more cruel and dramatic in following the mandate of Francisco. If Flamineo and Lodovico try to get hold of power, the Duke of Francisco capitalises his power to oust the Duke of Brachiano, and punish him because of his betrayal with Isabella and subsequent murder. Cardinal Monticelso also uses his power, Popish as it is, to undermine the status of woman. His treatment of Vittoria in the trial scene establishes the bias he carries out in the profession. Even Vittoria's ambition to better her position and status in society becomes visible. She betrays Camillo and develops relation with Brachiano. What leads her to take such a stance is nothing but her utter disregard at the condition with Camillo. Of course, she is motivated by Flamineo in this regard, and this proves her fragility of character to some extent.

***Appearance and Reality**:*

Both appearance and reality act as contrasting elements in the play. The deceptive nature of appearance poses difficulty for readers and theatregoers in framing sound image. Perhaps, this contributes to the accomplishment of ambiguity Webster was very fond of in his dramatic pursuits. It is found that Francisco and Monticelso are noble by birth and in status, but this is not maintained in reality. Their nobility is missing, and they come close to Flamineo and Lodovico. Though Monticelso is a Cardinal, he is a seeker of blood and hatred in reality. With him, Webster has presented the

darker side of religious institution as operational in society. Similarly, Brachiano and Flamineo are villains, but the way they behave and appear is hardly understandable to readers and spectators. It is through action that their villainy comes at the surface level. Indeed, the theme helps a lot in giving momentum to the action of the play, and it also warrants careful reading to discern the underlying charm.

Misogyny:

There is a genuine contempt being shown for women in the play. Most of the male characters do not seem to have decent approach to their female counterparts. Cruel and mischievous as he is, Flamineo utters words that go against the interest of women including his mother and sister. He generalises women as the embodiment of all that is not acceptable in a world of activity and progress. The way he uses Vittoria to win over the love of Brachiano is a pointer towards commodification of women in a male-dominating structure. Monticelso is another person to have shown misogyny in its extremity. He uncompromisingly tries to hold Vittoria responsible for the adultery she develops with Brachiano. But, she counters, and never lets her being swept away by his terse arguments. Again, Brachiano's betrayal with Isabella relates to the least regard accorded to women. Having known her husband's secret union with Vittoria, Isabella tries to persuade him into her fold, but in vain. Then she becomes arrogant and offended. However, her arrogance is found to be more directed towards Vittoria than Brachiano. This points out the effect of system women are placed upon, and by coming under this, they start finding out fault with the same sex.

Individualism*:*

Individualism is another theme of importance in the play. Interestingly, the theme centres on anarchic individuals and oppressive rules that govern a given society. As the play opens, we find murderous Lodovico voicing out his concern at establishing his lost position, which is a consequence of banishment. Then Brachiano's turn comes up, and his individualism is pronounced to

a great extent. He intends, also does, to divorce his wife, Isabella, and follow desires for Vittoria. The adultery he follows seems to be an offshoot of individualism that is operational in his personality. Vittoria's response to Brachiano may also be taken as a measure to uplift her individual entity in the eye of others. However, it is none other than Flamineo who exhibits robust individualism in his approach to life. Whatever he does is directed towards personal gain, and he cuts the image of a genuine malcontent to satisfy the desires and expectations. Besides the personal ambience, oppressive social forces are equally harmful to the characters. As the social forces posed by Monticelso stand as obstacles to her union with Brachiano, Vittoria wants to do away with them. Similarly, Flamineo also is subject to the social structure that plans everything for him in advance.

***Medievalism**:*

The play also provides the taste of medievalism despite its production in the early 17th century. Many a good value of morality plays coupled with the charm of chivalry makes an interesting study for readers and critics alike. As the confrontation between good and evil or virtue and vice is an inseparable part of the medieval morality plays, there is no dearth of the element in the play. Here too, Cornelia stands for virtue and most of the characters including Flamineo, Lodovico, and Zanche for vice. In addition to this, many chivalric values such as Giovanni's suit of armor, frequent entries and exits of knights and ambassadors characterise the play.

13.3.3 Major Characters

In this section, we shall have a look at the important characters of the play *The White Devil*.

Vittoria:

Of all the characters, Vittoria Corombona reigns supreme in the play. She is adopted as a faithful study of Italian courtesan, a development that gained popularity in the 17th century. Study of

characters like Vittoria drew much attention from writers of the period. Hence, we find Evadne in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* or Bianca in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* as a faithful ally of Vittoria. She is a daughter of Cornelia, and sister of Flamineo and Marcello. Indeed, the play is titled after her, the objective being to establish her as a devil in white complexion. It is nothing but her adultery with the Duke of Brachiano that makes the people concerned, regard her as a devil. However, such a proposition is more of a mischievous and biased structure quite operational in society. What strikes us the most is her betrayal with husband, Camillo by developing incestuous relation with Brachiano. Of course, her growing weakness for Brachiano is largely accentuated by brother, Flamineo, who tries everything to undo his financial crunch in life. Her cruelty is very much pronounced when she is not moved at the death of Camillo. On the contrary, her mother, Cornelia is moved at the unfortunate death of son-in-law, Camillo. It is in the trial scene that Vittoria's image of a defensive and courageous personality gets well articulated. With her talent and presence of mind, she understands the partiality of judgment as adhered to by Monticelso and the rest of the lawyers. However, she never lets her down, and cuts an image of strong personality. She says, "I will not weep;/No, I do scorn to call up one poor tear/To fawn on your injustice." She is very straightforward, and speaks of Flamineo's inhuman nature. Though he is her brother, she is not blind to his faults and course of action. Hence, she says to Flamineo, "What have I gain'd by thee, but infamy?/Thou hast stain'd the spotless honour of my house,/And frighted thence noble society."

Brachiano:

Husband to Isabella and a duke, Brachiano plays a vital role in the play. Indeed, his relation with Vittoria, and his pro-active hand in the death of Isabella and rival, Camillo are all that makes his personality notoriously interesting. It is understood that the interest he draws is not of any positive quality; rather of something, which is

scarcely accepted in a decent society. As Vittoria's beauty and sexual attraction distracts the celibacy of his married-life, he seems to appear as a weak personality. This is more articulated under the spell of Flamineo. After all, Flamineo is a secretary to him, and a gap should be maintained to some extent. However, this what misses from his rapport with Flamineo. Besides betraying Isabella, Brachiano also fails as a father since the duties to Giovanni are not found being attended. He turns out as victim to the vengeance of Francisco. However, the prospect of painful death overpowers him in the strongest measure. He expresses fear, "On pain of death, let no man name death to me:/ It is a word infinitely terrible." This related to the intensity of love he has for life and its charm. Ironically, his fear becomes a reality as he is poisoned and then strangled to death. As his ghost appears to Flamineo, throws earth upon him, and shows the skull, he provides the element of horror, besides forecasting the tragic downfall of Flamineo.

Flamineo:

Perhaps the most mischievous and cunning of all the characters is Flamineo, brother to Vittoria and Marcello, and son to Cornelia. Without him, the idea of the play hardly touches reality. Indeed, characters like Flamineo are very interesting to make study of since they garner the action the way they like. Very active and responsive as he is, Flamineo finds his close connection with Bosola of *The Duchess of Malfi.* Besides, Shakespeare also has capitalised characters like Iago in giving a distinctive colour to his plays in this direction. What Flamineo is obsessed with is his single-minded devotion to the betterment of financial crunch he is passing through all along. However, his approach to addressing this, and the measures he adopts are devoid of humanity. His obsession is so acute that he does not mind using Vittoria to win over the love of the Duke of Brachiano. Pushing Vittoria to adultery relates to the baser instinct he follows in materialising the hidden agenda. Apart from this, he appears as a constant companion to Brachiano, and most

often, he acts his mentor. Although he cuts his image as a courageous and uncompromising personality, he is not free from superstition. Hence, he does not like Brachiano taking his name when the latter is on the verge of death. He says, "I do not like that he (Brachiano) names me so often,/Especially on's death-bed; 'tis a sign/I shall not live long." However, his most inhuman nature comes up when he kills his brother, Marcello. It is true that he gets punishment at the end, but much action takes place before judgment is levied upon him.

Francisco:

Francisco De Medicis, Duke of Florence, is one of the major characters in the play. What is interesting about Francisco is that he takes up two different roles considering the need of hour. At first, he appears as duke in most of the scenes, and then a Moor by the name of Mulinassar in Act V. This relates to his capacity of making adjustment in accordance with what situation demands. However, the most significant aspect to his character is vengeance, largely conditioned by the injustice done to Isabella. His deep love of sister may easily be discerned, and he takes the resolve to punish Brachiano that results in success. Indeed, Francisco's motif of revenge has oriented the play along the tradition of revenge to a great extent. There is no denying the fact that Francisco avenges the death of Isabella, but his opposition to Brachiano is also a development based on his secret love for Vittoria, something that has not been developed in a great degree. Though he does not confess it to her, he intends to keep her fond memory in versification. Thus he says, "I am in love,/In love with Corombona; and my suit/ Thus halts to her in verse." In combination of all this, he takes revenge upon Brachiano with co-operation from Lodovico, Gasparo, and Antonelli. Cardinal Monticelso's close rapport with Francisco also establishes him as an influential figure having wide-spread network. Though he has a genuine ground to develop vengeance, accomplishing the said motif with the help of equally hypocrites like Lodovico reduces the dignity of revenge to a great extent.

Monticelso:

It is through Monticelso that Webster has presented the institution of church as all influential in a given society. He is a public figure, and his inclusion has extended the bounds of the pre-eminently family play. However, Monticelso is not presented in favourable terms; he is someone unfailingly connected to bias, prejudice, and gender discrimination. In the trial of Vittoria, he accuses her in strong measure, and holds her solely responsible for adultery with Brachiano. He is so enraged at the development that he does not mind using foul language as well in the pursuit of judgment. Although a Cardinal of high stature, as people would like to acknowledge him, Monticelso cannot maintain it. He is so associated with Francisco that he forgets the dignity usually assigned to a Cardinal. Though a negative character as such, Monticelso is active and resolute in taking the course of action. He also constitutes the element of irony, usually taken for doing good to others, does the opposite, and the touch of humanity is completely missing from him. Satiric portrayal of Monticelso is what has been intended in the play. The uncompromising nature of Monticelso is another defining trait to his personality. As the play progresses, he does not seem to have the same role as played out at the initial stage.

Lodovico:

There lies much significance in the character of Lodovico since the play starts in his conversation with close associates, Antonelli and Gasparo, and interestingly the last scene also sees him in the company of Giovanni. No other character in the play makes such a presence a reality. In the very first scene, Lodovico represents his decayed lot, and it is a sign of most of the Italian counts passing through deep financial crunch. This apart, what is so striking about Lodovico is his uncompromising revengeful attitude that finds a decent ally in Francisco. This seems true that Lodovico's association with Francisco is more of undoing his present financial condition. So he does everything as Francisco wants. But the most potent

cause conditioning his stance is his hard-core intention to take revenge upon Brachiano. This is what Francisco wants too with a view to avenging the death of Isabella. It is in front of Monticelso that Lodovico exposes his inner sexual weakness for Isabella, and she is killed in the plan hatched by Brachiano, Lodovico's rivalry goes farther developing himself an avenger. He says to Monticelso, "Sir, I did love Brachiano's duchess dearly,/Or rather I pursued her with hot lust,/Though she ne'er knew on't." Though a hypocrite at the fullest, Lodovico is a firm and resolute character. He assumes a kind of position that is no less in stature when compared to that of Flamineo.

13.3.4 Webster's Art of Characterisation

Webster has shown great mastery over characterisation in *The White Devil.* It is widely acknowledged that in both the tragedies, *The White Devil,* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, he has created a few characters that have assumed an identity of their own, and they are much in circulation among the readers and theatregoers. They are not mere characters. What they stand for is an inseparable entity to respective plot, and both plot and characterisation maintain their close proximity. Giving a vent to his acumen in characterisation, Webster has enriched the world of *The White Devil* with a number of characters drawn from Italian aristocrats, churchmen, courtesans, and courtiers. Drawing characters from various classes, Webster has created a society of mixed colour and composition. However, all the characters are not uniformly developed. If a few characters are given much focus, there are certain others who could not be measured at the same level. Of course, this has been done keeping in view the requirements of the course of action and turn of events. In addition, characters appearing in disguise constitute another important criterion as far as Webster's art of characterisation is concerned.

Through characterisation, Webster intends to provide a wide-ranging scenario as existed in the later 16th and early 17th centuries.

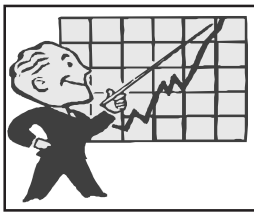
It is true that he made use of different sources in writing down the play and a few of its characters. Maintaining an open eye to the available sources he showcases how well read and well-informative he was. However, novelty and ingenuity could be observed in the modification he has made in characterisation based on different sources. For instance, Flamineo and Marcello, as they appear in the play, bear little resemblance to their historical prototypes. Besides, giving Cornelia a strong moral nature, focusing Giovanni's role, and making Francisco pre-eminently a revengeful personality, Webster exhibits adaptability as a marked development in his art of characterisation.

The White Devil, and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are based on women as protagonists. Of course, their tragic downfall counts for in the plays. They meet with catastrophic end because of the male-dominating social structure they are placed in. The tragic dimension they experience in life is not of a Shakespearean type, in which individuals are mainly responsible for what they confront at various moments. However, we cannot rule out what is popularly called 'error of judgment'. Vittoria's decision to develop incest with Brachiano after getting married to Camillo is not acceptable in a civilised society, and many ups and downs could be noticed in the aftermath of the relationship. However, Vittoria is partially responsible for the tragic phase in life since an all-powerful social structure as conditioned by Flamineo and Monticelso has its major role in inculcating the turn of life, but for the worst. Keeping in view his hidden agenda, Flamineo utilises Vittoria for his own benefit. Similarly, Cardinal Monticelso sets everything that goes against Vittoria's interest. As in *The White Devil,* the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* turns out a victim to male chauvinism run by her two brothers, and their close associate, Bosola. Hence, the tragic downfall the two women protagonists have experienced owes much to an outside agency, and this is what makes the study of the text quite fascinating and effective as well.

Although Webster takes up Vittoria as a central character and the intention of showing her a devil is very much present, the course of action the play initiates in succeeding phase does not seem so responsive to showing her in that light. Apart from adultery, much of her action cannot be categorised into the mode of devilish or cruel nature. In fact, her characterisation is more of victimisation than of a fault on her own. The male members appear more devilish than Vittoria does. Flamineo, Monticelso, Lodovico, Gasparo, and Antonelli are all hypocrites, and the play seems to have thrown much light on them, not on Vittoria of the same proportion. This relates to the non-conformity between the title and the mode of action most of the characters take recourse to. Vitoria apart, rest of the women characters do not have the same treatment too as their male counterparts have enjoyed. Whether it is Isabella or Cornelia, we do not find her assuming significant role in the play. Isabella is betrayed by Brachiano, and when she comes to know of this, there is hardly any space given to her characterisation so that she could have taken an acceptable measure. It is her death that quickly follows the knowledge of Vittoria and Brachiano's infamy. Another interesting aspect to be noticed about Isabella is also her victimisation to a patriarchal norm when she holds Vittoria mainly responsible for Brachiano's betrayal. It is true that Cornelia has been presented in favourable terms. She is a virtuous lady standing in favour of nobility. When Camillo dies, it is none other than Cornelia who feels sad at the unexpected demise of her son-in-law. But her role is not given due space, and she fails to convince others along the line of humanity and fellow-feeling. She is, so to speak, sidelined in the whirlpool of revenge, hatred, and enmity most of the characters would like to follow as normal routine in life.

The play introduces a number of Moorish characters, and they have given an added weightage to Webster's art of characterisation. It is through minor characters that the technique has been realised. As such, the play presents Zanche, servant to

Vittoria, and Jaques, servant to Giovanni as Moors. Even a central character like Francisco, Duke of Florence, disguises himself as a Moor by the name of Mulinassar. Of course, his disguise is intended to scale success, viz. to take revenge upon Brachiano. Here Webster has shown great skill since the characterisation succeeds in yielding the desired goal of Francisco. No one suspects the Moorish manner as showcased by Francisco. In addition to this, inclusion of the Moorish characters points out to the proximity of the Ottoman Empire or 'Oriental' mystery as well. Thus, it opens up new areas of study concerning the play. Besides, Lodovico and Gasparo's appearance as Capuchins in the second half of the play is another aspect to characterisation. Apart from imparting pictorial quality to the play, it represents the taste of Roman Catholicism. Thus, a great variety of tastes could be noticed here. Interestingly, the court as presented in the play is found being frequented by a number of foreign ambassadors. This relates to the close contact the court used to maintain in relation to various matter and issues.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Comment on Webster's art of characterisation.



13.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we came to know about Webster's practice of drama, especially in his play *The White Devil.* He occupied an important position among the post-Shakespearean dramatists. Though he tried hand in tragi-comedy, he was not as much successful as he was in writing down tragedy. Webster's *The White Devil* is one of his most successful plays. While reading the play, we come across a number of key areas such as lust, ambition, power, betrayal, mortality, femininity etc. All these make the play quite interesting. Although the play is an accomplished work of art, there

are certain areas that fall under scanner of a critical eye. The play involves a host of major themes that have opened up new vistas of interest in the play. Revenge, appearance and reality, ambition and power, individualism, and medievalism are some of the themes drawing wide-ranging attention. With various characters, the action of the play makes smooth run. As such, characters like Vittoria, Flamineo, Brachiano, Francisco, Monticelso, Lodovico have been given due consideration.



13.5 FURTHER READING

Berry, R.(1972). *Art of John Webster.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Forker, Charles R.(1986) *Skull Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster.* Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Grierson, J.C.(1958). *Cross-Currents in 17th century English Literature*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

13.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Adultery or illicit relationship affected the sizeable section of people in the aftermath of Queen Elizabeth's reign. In this sense, the play was a due response to the background or what time demanded.

Ans to Q No 2: Perhaps true… …certain episodes of the play do not have much connection to the principal area of interest… …however such episodes do not obstruct the usual course of action along what is intended by the dramatist… …as such, the plot in the play does not deserve much blame as Webster himself wanted it like that.

Ans to Q No 3: Usually, the devil is is a recurring motif in the European and American socio-cultural set up… …Webster is an exception seeking to show devilish nature in people without following conventional code and assumption… …Vittoria is not the only devil in the play; rather

she acts a part of the larger spectrum of people equally mischievous, malevolent or what is popularly called devils.

Ans to Q No 4: The play is a microcosm of Italy with people drawn from a great variety of professions… …aristocrats, churchmen, courtesans, and courtiers throng the play… …these people maintain their stance as permissible within the bounds of their class… …as long as they carry out the cultural norms everything is good and acceptable… …once that pattern is dismantled complicacy arises as you can see in the case of Vittoria and Flamineo.

Ans to Q No 5: Through characterisation, Webster intends to provide a wide-ranging scenario as existed in the later 16th and early 17th centuries… …this also displays how well read and well-informative he was… …novelty and ingenuity could be observed in the modification he made in characterisation… …Flamineo and Marcello bear little resemblance to their historical prototypes…. …giving Cornelia a strong moral nature, focusing Giovanni's role, and making Francisco pre-eminently a revengeful personality, Webster exhibits adaptability as a marked development in his art of characterisation.



13.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q.1: Write a note on Webster's contribution to the field of drama. Do you think his writing is completely in line of the famous revenge tradition? Give a reasoned answer.

Q.2: What are the various issues and ideas you get in reading Webster's *The White Devil*? Which of the issues have been given major thrust in the play?

Q.3: Discuss the significance of the title "The White Devil". Do you consider the title as apt and appropriate?

Q.4: How does social structure affect the life of individuals? Is there any resistance posed to the all-engulfing structure? How much the conceivable resistance is successful in the play?

Q.5: Write a note on the depiction of women characters in the play. Do you find women issues being faithfully presented in the play?

Q.6: Make a comparative study between Brachiano and Francisco. What are the major causes leading to the vengeance for each other?

Q.7: Webster's *The White Devil* is widely accepted as a grim and serious play. Do you agree? If yes, give reasons in support of your position.

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UNIT 14: WILLIAM CONGREVE: *THE WAY OF THE WORLD* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 William Congreve: The Playwright

14.4 Act wise Summary of the Play

14.5 Critical Reception of Congreve's *The Way of the World*

14.6 Let us Sum up

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.9 Possible Questions

14.1 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss Congreve's life and literary works in detail
- identify the sources Congreve made use of in the play *The Way of the World*
- make a summary of the play
- discuss the place Congreve enjoyed as playwright

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to William Congreve and his play *The Way of the World.* Though not well received during its time, this play is the most finished of William Congreve's comedies. Congreve was a prolific writer of comedies with his brilliantly drawn characters and satiric portrayal of high society. Their witty dialogues, skilful plots and perfectly crafty deployment of contrasting characters and themes mark his comedies. They explore social values, marital practices and the intrigues and deceits carried out in high society. Congreve has more feeling for the individual and is very subtle with his/her emotions, thus probing deeper than any of his contemporaries.

In this unit, we shall not only discuss the life and works of Wliiam Congreve but will also get an opportunity to read the summary of the play. You will find that wit is a major instrument in the play and it serves to highlight the brilliance of the characters and their dialogues.

14.3 WILLIAM CONGREVE: THE PLAYWRIGHT



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William Congreve was one of the most influential of English dramatists of the Restoration period, who helped shape the English Comedy of Manners with his brilliant and satirical portrayal of the fashionable society of England coupled with excellent comic dialogues and an intense scrutiny of the affectations of his time. Let us now discus the life and works of William Congreve.

Congreve was born on 24th January, 1670 at Bardsey, near Leeds. His father became a lieutenant in the Irish army in 1674 and in 1782; he joined the regiment of the Duke of Ormond. Congreve attended Kilkenny School, which was the Eton of Ireland. In April 1686, he entered Trinity College, Dublin, from where he received his M.A. in 1696. Here, Jonathan Swift became a near contemporary and a lifelong friend. It was here that Congreve's interest in drama originated. In 1691, He entered the Middle Temple as a law student, but never really practised it as his real love was for the theatre. Then he began his literary career by publishing a light, but delightful novel *Incognita* or, *Love and Duty Reconcil'd*. Congreve became a protégé of John Dryden and even collaborated with Dryden in his translation of the satires of Juvenal and Persius (1693). He became a prolific writer of comedies with his brilliantly drawn characters and satiric portrayal of high society. He lived in comfort and his friendships with numerous literary luminaries like Swift, Alexander Pope, John Gay, and Richard Steele were warm and constant. Congreve was also a great friend of the actress Anne Bracegirdle, who was also thought to be his lover, but the nature of their intimacy was never really determined. However,

in his later years, he was very attached to the second Duchess of Marlborough, with whom he almost certainly sired a daughter, Lady Mary Godolphin, later Duchess of Leeds. Congreve never really recovered from a fall suffered in a carriage accident in 1718, and died in January, 1729, leaving a large legacy of his fortune to the Duchess of Marlborough. He was laid to rest in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

Congreve's first play *The Old Bachelor*, which was published in 1693, made him famous. His popularity was further confirmed by the success of his two other plays, *The Double Dealer* (1693) and *Love for Love* (1695). *The Old Bachelor* appealed to the audiences, because it handled the themes they were familiar with. He wrote a single tragedy titled *The Mourning Bride* (1697), which was self-consciously poetic. Their witty dialogues, skilful plots and perfectly crafty deployment of contrasting characters and themes mark Congreve's comedies. They explore social values, marital practices and the intrigues and deceits carried out in high society. Jeremy Collier lashed out at Congreve and Vanbrugh in his *Short View on the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), to which Congreve responded with his *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (1698). Collier's attack so stung Congreve that it led to a diminution of his interest in the theatre, though he remained involved in the management of Lincoln's Inn Theatre until 1705. However, he published only one more comedy, *The Way of the World* (1700), a masterpiece of comedy of manners. He continued to write in the 18th century, publishing one masque *The Judgment of Paris* (1701), an operatic piece called *Semele* (1710), a prose tale titled *An Impossible Thing* (1720), an edition of *The Dramatic Works of Dryden* (1717) and a number of poems.

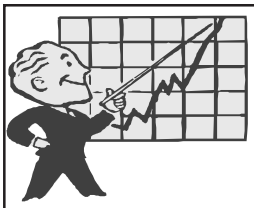
Congreve is without doubt one of the outstanding writers of the English comedy of manners which takes as its main theme the manners, follies and foibles of the class to which it was addressed. It also deals with the imitators of French customs, conceited wits and fantastic characters. Restoration comedy is a kind of critical comedy, aimed at curing excess, and "bringing the sword of common sense" to bear upon the extravagant assumptions of the age. Congreve rises above his contemporaries in his

delicacy of feeling and perfection of his phrasing. William Hazlitt praised Congreve thus: “Every sentence is replete with sense and satire, conveyed in the most polished and pointed terms.” George Meredith was of the opinion that: “He is at once precise and voluble...in this he is a classic, and is worthy of treading a measure with Moliere.” Congreve has more feeling for the individual and is very subtle with his emotions, thus probing deeper than any of his contemporaries. A sensitive craftsman, he wrote thoughtfully conceived and expertly contrived works. Though not equal to Moliere, he can be called the nearest English approach to him. Congreve, like other comic dramatists, reflected the manners of the period but at the same time sought to improve his audience through satire, in the manner of Ben Jonson.



LET US KNOW

In Giles Jacob’s *Poetical Register* (1719), Congreve’s character is described as being “so far from being puff’d up with Vanity…that he abounds with Humility and good Nature. He does not show so much the Poet as the Gentleman.” The last phrase may be taken as a comment on the infamous meeting with Voltaire who came to England in 1726 to extract what he could from the great writer of English comedy. The fatigue stricken and ailing Congreve was not interested in discussing the finer nuances of comic writing or a play he had written some 30 years earlier. He famously told Voltaire that he would be glad to talk on general subjects, “on the footing of a gentleman”, but not on subjects where he would be expected to display expert critical knowledge.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who were the famous literary luminaries with whom Congreve shared friendship?

Q 2: Name some of Congreve’s successful works.

Q 3: What are the most significant characteristics of Congreve’s plays?

14.4 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

[Adapted from National Arts Centre Study Guide available in http://www.nac-cna.ca/pdf/eth/0708/the way of the world guide.pdf]

Prologue:

It tells the audience that writers are fools, who gamble that their audience will like their offerings, and Congreve throws himself on the mercy of the audience. He tells them not to accept a satire, since they are already perfect.

Act I

This act is set in a men's club famous for social gatherings, gossips and gambles. Mirabell is losing at cards to his friend, Fainall. He tells Fainall that Mrs. Millamant humiliated him in public the previous night. Millamant is heir to a fortune which depends on whether her aunt Lady Wishfort approves of her marriage. Mirabell had pretended to love Lady Wishfort in order to get closer to Millamant and her friend Mrs. Marwood. Humiliated, Lady Wishfort would obviously not approve of Mirabell's marrying her niece. This situation helps in the development of the plot of the play in the subsequent acts. An obsessed Mirabell tells Fainall that Millamant puts up with Witwoud and Petulent, two coxcombs and fools, and confesses that he likes her in spite of all her faults. A letter arrives from Wilful to his half brother who is playing card at the club telling that he is planning for travel abroad for the first time as he is young enough to go on adventuring even at the age of 40. Subsequently, the other half brother Witwoud describes Petulant's faults as virtues, and misunderstands the insults inflicted on him by Mirabell and Fainall as jokes. The plot advances with Mirabell coming to know that Lady Wishfort is planning to marry her niece Millamant, to Mirabell's uncle who is visiting London hoping to disinherit Mirabell. The act ends with a couplet by Mirabell, stating that Petulant's behaviour is not wit but ignorance.

Act II

This act introduces the women characters of the play. It is set in St James' Park, a famous place known for promenade. Mrs Fainall and Mrs. Marwood discuss the nastiness of men. Fainall and Mirabell meet the ladies and gradually we learn that Fainall and Marwood are lovers, and that Mirabell

and Mrs. Fainall too had an affair once. Mrs. Marwood and Fainall quarrel and she covers her tears with a mask as Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall enter. Mrs Fainall tells Mirabell that she despises her husband and that once she loved Mirabell 'without bounds'. But she finally married Fainall only for her own benefit and reputation. Mirabell too tells her the intrigue he is currently planning. Mirabell's servant Waitwell has married Foible who is a maid to Lady Wishfort. But, Waitwell pretends to be Mirabell's uncle Sir Rowland who seeks to woo Lady Wishfort. When she discovers the truth, she is so embarrassed that she will allow Millamant to rescue her and to marry Mirabell, to save her own reputation. Millamant arrives and we finally meet both Mirabell and Millamant together. Witwoud, as usual, follows Millamant who jokes that she and her maid Mincing, use his letters to pin up their hair. Mirabell wants to know why Millamant snubbed him in public and asks her why she spends time with fools. She instead says that she knows of his intentions. Mirabell now faces the real problems in love. At the end of this act, we meet the newly married servants Foible and Waitwell. Foible, Mirabell's confidant tells him that she has pretended to show Sir Rowland lady Wishfort's picture to inflame his desire for her, and is planning to report this impatience to Lady Wishfort. But, Foible panics as she feels that masked Mrs. Marwood will report to her Mistress Wishfort about her seeing Foible and Mirabell together. Mirabell asks Waitwell to transform into Sir Rowland.

Restoration Comedy

A kind of English comedy flourishing during the Restoration period. Usually the form of the 'Comedy of Manners', the plots of the Restoration comedy, were based mainly on the complex intrigues of the marriage market. However, you should note that the cynical approach to marriage and sexual infidelity in Restoration comedy invited serious accusations of immortality. George Etheredge's *The Man of Mode* (1676), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) and William Congreve's *The Way of The World* (1700) are famous examples of Restoration Comedy.

Act III

This act takes place in Lady Wishfort's home. She is bidding her servant Peg to give her a proper makeup. Mrs Marwood arrives and tells

Wishfort that she saw Foible with Mirabell. Wishfort asks Marwood to hide in the closet when Wishfort would question Foible. Foible instead succeeds in lying and states that Mirabell insulted Lady Wishfort again by calling her old, and tells that Sir Rowland will be there soon. Lady Wishfort, now in great need of her makeup, because she is desparate for a husband, does not want to make the first move. Mrs Fainall enters and tells Foible that she knows of the plot against Lady Wishfort. Foible tells Mrs Fainall that she is worried about Mrs. Marwood who had seen her and that Marwood likes Mirabell. But, they are unaware that Mrs Marwood is overhearing everything from the closet. After they depart, Mrs. Marwood resolves to ruin everything for Mirabell and suggests Lady Wishfort that she marry Millamant to Witwoud. Wishfort likes the idea. Millamant enters with her maid, Mincing and Marwood tells that her love is known, and that she need not pretend. Both accuse each other but then both say they hate Mirabell. Marwood warns Millamant that her happiness may be changed sooner than she thinks. Sir Wilfull enters to meet his half brother Witwould who pretends not to recognize his country brother. Instead, he, with Petulant, makes fun of Wilfull for his country manners, and Wifull, in return, calls him a fop and dandy. Marwood tells Fainall of Mirabell's plot. Fainall is outraged and upset after getting to know that his wife was involved with Mirabell before, and she had outwitted him now. Mrs. Marwoud wants to prevent any chance of Mirabell's getting Millamant's fortune and suggests a plot of her own: if they tell Wishfort of her daughter's behaviour with Mirabell, she will then be desperate to do anything to save Mrs. Fainall's reputation. Mrs. Marwood plans to write a letter to Lady Wishfort.

Act IV

Lady Wishfort works out the best pose for Sir Rowland. Foible tells her that Wifull is getting drunk and Wishfort sends for Millamant so that she won't be left alone with Sir Rowland. The next scene is the famous Proviso scene in which Mirabell and Millamant, equally strong-willed, discuss in detail the conditions under which they would accept each other in marriage, showing the depth of feeling for each other. Each is anxious to preserve their independence. The two eventually agree on their contract. Mirabell finally proposes to Millamant and, with Mrs. Fainall's encouragement (almost

consent, as Millamant knows of their previous relations), Millamant accepts. Mirabell leaves as Lady Wishfort arrives with Sir Wilfull. He is loud, drunk, agreeing to marry Millamant, and singing and discussing travel plans. He smells so terrible that Millamant and Fainall leave and Witwoud takes him away at Wishfort's behest. Then, Waitwell enters disguised as Sir Rowland. He pretends to be madly in love with Wishfort who readily agrees to marry him. Lady Wishfort later gets a letter telling her about the Sir Rowland plot and Waitwell tells that it is another trick of Mirabell. Sir Rowland takes the letter and accuses Mirabell of trying to sabotage their wedding. Lady Wishfort agrees to let Sir Rowland bring a marriage contract that night.

Act V

The setting is still Lady Wishfort's home. Wishfort has found out the plot, and Fainall has had Waitwell arrested. Mrs. Fainall tells Foible that her previous affair with Mirabell is now public knowledge. Lady Wishfort appears with Mrs. Marwood, whom she's thanking for unveiling the plot. Then she attacks her daughter for her bad behaviour, finding it all the worse since she herself has always been a model of virtue. Fainall then appears and uses the information of Mrs. Fainall's previous affair with Mirabell and Millamant's contract to marry him to blackmail Lady Wishfort, telling that she should never marry and that she is to transfer all the money over to him. Mrs. Marwood horrifies Wishfort with the description of a possible court scene and its social ramifications. Lady Wishfort tells Mirabell that she will offer consent to the marriage if he can save her fortune and honour. Mirabell calls on Waitwell who brings a contract from the time before the marriage of the Fainalls in which Mrs. Fainall gives all her property to Mirabell. This neutralises the blackmail attempts, after which Mirabell restores Mrs. Fainall's property to her possession and then is free to marry Millamant with the full 6000 pounds inheritance. This act ends with a quatrain on adultery.

Epilogue:

The closing lines in the epilogue speak to the drama critics in the audience, making sure that they all know that no single person is the butt of the play, but that it is 'the times' that have been satirized.

14.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *THE WAY OF THE WORLD*

Many critics consider the play to be a study of the battle between good and evil, rather than of the characteristically Restoration conflict between the witty and the foolish. Edith Evans' performance as Millamant in 1924, revealed the full power of Congreve's theatre. Evans portrayed Millamant as a woman suspended between a thorough disillusionment with a shallow society and the insatiable desire of flesh and spirit to find the security of love. *The Way of the World* can be ideologically read as a key text for understanding the intellectual, political or social culture of Congreve's period. In a materialistic society engaged in a ruthless pursuit of wealth, the social world can be construed as being controlled by the "true wit" of the idealised pairing of Mirabell with Millamant. The fact that the play initially failed to set the stage on fire may well be because of its complex morality and intellectualism. The plot is a bit difficult to follow and the familial relationships are slightly bewildering. Nevertheless, Congreve's satire raises moral issues and his world relates to the skeptical philosophy of Locke. Mirabell and Millamant, as members of an emergent middle class, freely engage in a contractual marriage based on love.

The play *The Way of the World* historically and culturally attempts a negotiation between the old world of the Restoration and the emergent culture of the new century. According to Andrew Varney:

"Wit was the dominant mode of the late seventeenth century, specifically the period of what might be called the long Restoration, from 1660 to 1700, and it was not just a cultural fashion but an aggressive and assertive articulation of the aristocratic, quasi-aristocratic and 'wannabe' aristocratic elite that, with increasing precariousness, held centre-stage in public life. Wit dominated in the re-opened public theatres, and it was the celebrated quality of private verses." (Varney:35)

The world of wit serves to distort the very words which make the quality of existence intelligible. And in order to find a way out of this world, it will have to be negotiated in new terms. This is what is attempted in the

famous 'Proviso' scene when Mirabell and Millamant negotiate the legal terms on which they might be able to live together as man and wife. The play seems to be more important in its parts than its whole. Congreve has a sharp eye for certain situations- the gross self-deception of Lady Wishfort, the backbiting of Witwoud, the inability of Millamant, who loves Mirabell "violently", to say more to his face than that she 'might by degrees dwindle into a wife', or the love that Mirabell feels for her. Mirabell and Millamant retain their individuality and never compromise of their liberty. The play is a battle of wits and not of words, and the most artful plotter is the victorious one. And, as Varney says, "The play may not be opening up a way out of the world as much as securing a temporary respite while the rules are transcribed into new terms." (Varney: 48) Charles Lamb was one of the earliest critics to write in defense of the Restoration comedy in general and to comment on Congreve's method of characterization in *The Way of The World* where one would not love or hate the characters if they are not approached from any moral prejudice. Later L. C. Knights in the 20th century, who represents a new approach to the study of Restoration Comedy, finds nothing worthwhile in this type of Comedy. Before him, Bonamy Dobree considered Restoration Comedy as an accurate mirror of the society and reserved high praise for Congreve's plays.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What makes *The Way of the World* a representative play?



14.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit, must have acquainted you with the life and works of William Congreve, the great Neoclassical dramatist who shaped the English Comedy of Manners through his brilliant comic dialogue, his satirical portrayal of fashionable society, and his ironic scrutiny of the affectations of his age. The play *The Way of the World* conforms to all these

characteristics; it is a play about human adjustment as well as human responsibilities. You will admit that there is nothing like the brilliance, depth of emotion and profundity of the famous bargaining scene in the entire range of Restoration comedy. Finally, you have learnt what critics have to say about the play. Congreve, through this excellent play, reveals the great human paradox that art and nature must unite to create the artifice that is life.



14.7 FURTHER READING

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Womersley, David. (ed). (2000). *A Companion to Literature- From Milton to Blake*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Websites:

http://www.nac-cna.ca/pdf/eth/0708/the_way_of_the_world_guide.pdf

14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Jonathan Swift, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, John Gay, Richard Steele, and so on.

Ans to Q No 2: The plays*The Old Bachelor* (1693), *The Double Dealer* (1693), and *Love for Love* (1695). *The Way of the World* (1700)… …the masque *The Judgment of Paris* (1701)… …a prose work *An Impossible Thing* (1720)… …an edition of *The Dramatic Works of Dryden* (1717) and a number of poems.

Ans to Q No 3: Congreve's comedies are marked by their witty dialogues, skilful plots and perfectly crafty deployment of contrasting characters and themes. They explore social values, marital practices and the intrigues and deceits carried out in high society.

Ans to Q No 4: *The Way of the World* can be ideologically read as a key text for understanding the intellectual, political or social culture of Congreve's period. In a materialistic society engaged in a ruthless pursuit of wealth, the social world can be construed as being controlled by the "true wit" of the idealised pairing of Mirabell with Millamant. The fact that the play initially failed to set the stage on fire may well be because of its complex morality and intellectualism.



14.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the plot of the play *The Way of the World*. Is it intricate and lacking in coherence?

Q 2: How has Congreve given us a play which contains within itself "the artful Solution of the Fable"?

Q 3: Write a note on the life and works of William Congreve. In what ways, did Congreve popularise the Restoration comedy of manners?

Q 4: Do you think that the play revolves around the pursuit of wealth, or is it about sustaining human relationships in a materialistic world? Justify your answer.

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UNIT 15: WILLIAM CONGREVE: *THE WAY OF THE WORLD* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Critical Commentary of the Play

15.4 Major Themes

15.5 Major Characters

15.6 Let us Sum up

15.7 Further Reading

15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.9 Possible Questions

15.1 OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to

- explain the important issues of *The Way of the World* based on your reading
- identify the major themes and characters in the play
- discuss the critical reception of the play
- appreciate the play in its totality

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block as well as of the Course. Here an attempt has been made to provide a discussion of the different important aspects like themes and characterisation in William Congreve's play *The Way of the World*. You have already learnt that the play is centred on the two lovers Mirabell and Millamant. In order for them to marry and receive Millamant's full dowry, Mirabell must receive the blessing of Millamant's aunt, Lady Wishfort. Unfortunately, Lady Wishfort is a very bitter lady who despises Mirabell and wants her own nephew, Sir Wilfull, to wed Millamant. Another character, Fainall, is having a secret affair with Mrs. Marwood, a friend of

Mrs. Fainall's, who in turn once had an affair with Mirabell. In the meantime, Mirabell's servant is married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's servant. Waitwell pretends to be Sir Rowland and, on Mirabell's command, tries to trick Lady Wishfort into a false engagement. So, the play, as you will learn from this unit, is concerned with the problem of social living.

15.3 CRITICAL COMMENTARY OF THE PLAY

Congreve in the dedicatory Preface to the first edition of the play expresses his gratitude to the Earl of Montagu for "admitting me into your Conversation…in your Retirement last summer from the Town; for it was immediately after, that this Comedy was written." He started writing the play in 1699, and it was first performed in 1700, but as mentioned earlier, it was not as successful as his first play. However, Dryden considered it a moderate success and even Congreve writes in the Preface thus: "That it succeeded on the stage, almost beyond my Expectation." He goes on to comment— "but little of it was prepar'd for the general Taste which seems now to be predominant in the Pallets of our Audience." Therefore, it can be assumed that although the play was not expected to be well received, it became a moderate success. The play clearly proclaims what he has to say and is only marred by the artificial contrivances of the plot, a plot that is covered with the polish of elegant dialogues and wit.

Mirabell loves Millamant, and in order to marry her, he must win the consent of Lady Wishfort. Therefore, he pretends to make love to the aunt in order to conceal his suit of the niece. However, Lady Wishfort is only one of the obstacles. The deceit has been revealed to her by Mrs. Marwood, who is full of spite for Mirabell as the latter rejected her advances. Lady Wishfort now hates Mirabell and resolves to deprive her niece of the half of her inheritance, which is in her keeping if Millamant marries Mirabell. The latter contrives that his servant Waitwell will impersonate an uncle of his Sir Rowland, and will propose to Lady Wishfort, having however first married Lady Wishfort's woman, Foible. By this deception, Mirabell hopes to force Lady Wishfort to consent to his marriage with her niece. However, the plot is discovered by Mrs. Marwood, and also the fact that Mirabell has in the

past an affair with Mrs. Fainall, daughter of Lady Wishfort. She conspires with Fainall, her lover and Mirabell's pretended friend, to reveal all the facts to Lady Wishfort, and this conspiracy carries the play to the point of near-tragic confrontation. Millamant is also not easily won. She makes clear that she is not a milksop by laying down the conditions on which she would contemplate marriage to Mirabell in the famous "Proviso" scene in Act IV. When the villainies of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are exposed, the gullible Lady Wishfort, in gratitude for her release from Fainall's threats forgives Mirabell and consents to Millamant's marriage with him, thus bringing the play to a happy conclusion.

Act I gives us the exposition of the play by introducing almost all the male characters, informing the readers about the others and supplying all the background information. The opening scene between Mirabell and Fainall establishes Mirabell's love for Millamant, which is implied in Fainall's comment: "Confess, Millamant and you quarell'd last night." We also come to know about the main hindrance to the marriage—Lady Wishfort is in control of half of Millamant's fortune, and her prior consent is necessary for the money to be claimed. This constitutes the main problem of the play and everything gravitates towards it. Mirabell, as we already know, tried to trick Lady Wishfort once, and this was revealed to her by the spiteful Mrs. Marwood, and therefore the Lady is thoroughly incensed with Mirabell.



LET US KNOW

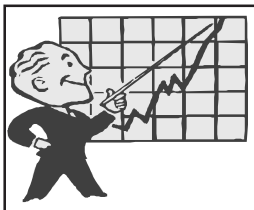
You must understand that the actual plot revolves around Mirabell's second trick, which is making his servant Waitwell pose as the former's fictitious uncle Sir Rowland, who would propose to Lady Wishfort. By Act II, everything is explained, and by its end, Waitwell leaves the stage to get into his Sir Rowland disguise, and the plan is well on its way to success. However, Act II also sets a subsidiary plot in motion. The reversal comes through Fainall and Mrs. Marwood.

Structurally, the centre of the play is Act III where Lady Wishfort enters the scene and the complications begin. Mrs. Marwood informs Lady Wishfort that she suspects Mirabell is up to some mischief, but Foible, Waitwell's wife, quickly saves the situation. But Mrs. Marwood secretly overhears the conversation between Foible and Mrs. Fainall, where they discuss the entire plot and also make a passing reference to Mrs. Fainall's earlier affair with Mirabell. However, at this very juncture, Congreve holds back the movement of the plot by introducing Sir Wilfull and his buffoonery and the readers' suspense and apprehension are sustained throughout the rest of Act III, and practically the whole of the next Act. At the end of the Act, Mrs. Marwood and Fainall meet to conspire about the plans of a counter attack.

The antics of Sir Wilfull fill up Act IV, and at the same time, the love between Mirabell and Millamant also moves towards its moment of exquisite consummation. Millamant surrenders to her love in Act IV, and Congreve's mastery over his dramatic art is superbly revealed in the proposal scene. Towards the end of the Act, Waitwell as Sir Rowland enacts his grotesque courtship of Lady Wishfort, and the famous bargaining scene or the "Proviso" scene also takes place now. Congreve conveys with absolute delicacy the poetry of the scene and the infinite superficiality of Mirabell and Millamant. Mrs. Marwood's anonymous letter to Lady Wishfort discloses the imposture of Sir Rowland, but Foible and Waitwell quickly try to avert a catastrophe by thinking up an excuse. Hence, Act IV ends on a note of suspense.

Act V holds the grand climax of the play. Waitwell and Foible's excuses have failed and Fainall and Mrs. Marwood demand the fortunes of Millamant and Mrs. Fainall from Lady Wishfort with threats and blackmail. When all seems to be going in favour of the villains, Congreve produces his *Peripeteia* or reversal of fortunes in the form of the black box. The black box, although totally unexpected, cannot be deemed as a *deus ex machina* to bring about a happy ending. In a society sustained by its legal systems, it is only natural that Mirabell, the Truewit of his age, will use such a device to protect the interests of Mrs. Fainall.

Congreve, as you will see through your reading of the play, enlivens the action with a fine *dramatis personae*, including fools like Sir Wilfull Witwoud, Lady Wishfort's boisterous and good-natured country nephew. They serve to highlight the stark contrast between the passionate and grasping relationship of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, and the delicacy by which Mirabell tries to convince Millamant that love can survive into marriage even in a mercenary society. Congreve, like Terence, thus gives us a play which contains within itself "the artful Solution of the Fable." Following the comedies of Ben Jonson Congreve gives each of his characters a name, which highlights a particular quality. Thus, Fainall is deceitful; Mirabell is admirable; Petulent is disagreeable and Millamant has a thousand lovers. Marwood stands for her spite and Lady Wishfort longs for love and marriage.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the main plot that sets the story in motion?

Q 2: Do you think that Act III is the centre of the play?

Q 3: What is the significance of the "Proviso" Scene?

15.4 MAJOR THEMES

You must have understood by now that 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.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Comment on the title of the play?

Q 5: What role does the thirst for wealth play as a theme in the play?

Q 6: Which two categories of people are depicted by Congreve in the play?

15.5 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Way of the World is portrays a number of interesting characters. Let us discuss some of the important characters in the play.

Mirabell:

Mirabell is the Truewit of his age and possesses all the characteristics of the urbane gentleman. He outsmarts Fainall in their conversations and dazzles the readers with his dexterity in wordplay. Mirabell is never witty just for the sake of being witty; wit is compliant with his moral sense. He is in no way interested in frivolous conversation and even advises Millamant to avoid "the Conversation of Fools". His seriousness and ethical nature distinguish him from the other characters in the play. You will notice his shrewdness, good judgment and wisdom in the way he arranges legal protection for Mrs. Fainall's wealth. Mrs. Marwood's nefarious plans fail to deter him, and he meets them with great poise. Mirabell's passion and love for Millamant does not overrule his judgment and he describes himself to Fainall as "a discerning Lover", who has taken Millamant "to pieces, sifted her and separated her Failings…study'd 'em, and got 'em by Rote." (Act I Sc i) He has learnt to love Millamant with all her faults and therefore he is confident that it will stand the test of time. Congreve has also allayed our suspicions regarding Mirabell's relationship with Mrs. Fainall by making him protect her wealth, and reputation. The affair, it is obvious, began and ended with mutual consent as Mrs. Fainall never accuses Mirabell of cheating her, and in fact remains his friend and ally throughout. However, as Fainall is a notorious character, Mrs. Fainall's life is ruined, and Mirabell has to be blamed for her situation. Therefore, Mirabell cannot be called a perfect person. But you must realise that Congreve knew what he was doing, because if Mirabell was portrayed as a wholly virtuous and good person, then he would not have attested to being a man of the world, affected by its ways. He would have become an ideal character, and Congreve's realistic assessment of life does not allow for perfection either in man or in society.

Millamant:

Millamant is a total delight with her exuberant personality and natural grace. She is confident of Mirabell's love for her and accepts the adoration

of men without any affectation. She is fearless and knows how to speak her mind without any qualms. However, Millamant's gaiety is also the façade behind which she hides her true self; her charming personality is infectious, but she must have her "faithful Solitude" and her "darling Contemplation". When the moment for surrendering to Mirabell draws near, there occurs a great turmoil within her mind, and even though she maintains a cool demeanour, we can sense a tenseness underlining whatever she does. Her speeches become halting and her restlessness makes her break one fan and nearly break another. But her anxiety never allows her to make a public display of her affection and love for Mirabell, for she considers it to be too private and precious. Only once does her mask fall, when she confesses to Mrs. Fainall: "I love him violently." (Act IV. Sc i) Millamant thus holds the readers in thrall and remains one of the great heroines of literature. Mirabell and Millamant together remind us of the great pair in Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing– Beatrice and Benedick.

Mrs. Fainall:

She is a good woman despite the fact that she had a past indiscretion with Mirabell, and is now able to take genuine pleasure in the happy affair between the latter and Millamant. However, she is a commonplace woman and pales into insignificance when compared to Millamant, and it is through her that Congreve is apprising us of the fact that a price has to be paid if the well-being of the society is to be preserved. Mrs. Fainall becomes a kind of sacrificial offering at the altar of society because of the unhappy and frustrated life she leads.

Fainall:

He is a cunning person, and not a Truewit, but his perverted ego makes him cynical rather than witty. A tinge of unpleasantness colours his speeches: "I'd no more play with a Man that slighted his ill Fortune, than I'd make Love to a Woman who undervalu'd the loss of her Reputation." (Act I. Sc i) Fainall has no sense of morality and his mercenary attitude makes him run through Mrs. Marwood's wealth, and also boast that he married only "to make lawful Prize of a rich Widow's Wealth". He is a despicable character and is full of contempt for his wife, and even draws sadistic

pleasure from mentally torturing and terrorising Lady Wishfort. His bestial characteristics are evident in the animal imagery scattered through his speeches. So, whenever Fainall is faced with a situation which goes beyond his control, he flees the scene and retreats ignominiously. He is very surprised by Mrs. Marwood's passion and unrealistically talks of an escape to another world. His wife's infidelity enrages him, but he is at a loss how to proceed thereafter. At the end of the play, Fainall loses everything and his cunningness remains just that; as he lacks the maturity of wisdom, the wise are left to govern the world. Fainall's relationships with Marwood is antagonistic in the sense that he is full of jealousies, doubt and bitterness. He can be absolutely cynical when he tells his wife "Your body shall be naked as your reputation."

Mrs. Marwood:

She is one lacking the wittiness of Fainall, her partner in crime, but she is more cunning and has that particular kind of female viciousness. She dons a sophisticated social mask, and when in a weak moment in St. James's Park, her resolve cracks, we are left astounded at the violence of her passions: "I care not-Let me go- break my Hands, do- I'd leave 'em to get loose." (Act II Sc i) Although Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress, she is actually in love with Mirabell and this unrequited love is the motivating force behind all her actions. She tries her level best to thwart the relationship of Mirabell and Millamant, but all her machinations go in vain. When she gets to hear about what Foible has to say that "Mr. Mirabell can't abide her", she becomes blinded by anger and thoughts of revenge. She does not think of an escape like Fainall did, but carefully works out the details of her plot, and with utter ruthlessness, brings Lady Wishfort down to earth. However, the civilized society has no place for people like Mrs. Marwood, and she eventually succumbs to defeat. She leaves the stage in a fit of impotent rage: "Yes, it shall have Vent-and to your Confusion, or I'll perish in the Attempt." (Act V Sc i)

Lady Wishfort:

She has a central role to play as she is in control of everyone's fortunes. She reveals herself as a person with a rich, imaginative and vivid

mindset. However, her self-deception in refusing to accept her advanced years and the decay of her youthful beauty mars her intelligence and makes her vulnerable. She is secretly envious of her niece, Millamant's beauty and at one time even states incredibly that her portrait makes her more beautiful than her niece: "You see that Picture has a sort of a – Ha Foible?—A Swimmingness in the Eyes—Yes, I'll look so—My Niece affects it; but she wants Features." (Act III Sc i) We may pity Lady Wishfort because she pines for a lover in order to convince and reassure herself that she is still beautiful, but her low self-confidence makes her behave foolishly. The scene with Sir Rowland thus becomes a parody of all love-scenes, and she loses all sense of proportion. Her insistence that she is not making "a Prostitution of Decorums" is only a wretched emphasis of her yearning for "the Iterationof Nuptials". Lady Wishfort is weakened by her genuine love for her daughter, and her fascination for Mirabell. When Millamant assures her that Mirabell will go away for ever, we find both relief and regret manifested in her speeches. She remains under Mirabell's spell and never quite succeeds in freeing herself from his hypnotic charm. The exaggeration of her character turns her almost into a caricature, and had she not been so grotesquely comic, she could almost have become tragic.

Witwoud and Petulant:

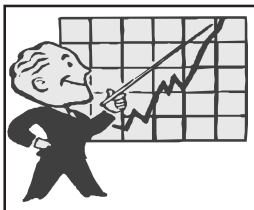
They are the Fools in the play. They do not really deserve separate discussion were it not for the fact that their presence in society is a matter of great concern, for their affectation breeds artificiality and robs a sophisticated society of its naturalness. Witwoud is so full of himself that he thinks he is the greatest intellectual and ridicules all and sundry, especially Petulant. The latter, on the other hand, delights in contradicting everyone, particularly Witwoud, and is even rude towards Millamant. Congreve is lenient towards them, and at the end of the play, they even help in the final overthrow of Fainall.

Sir Wilfull:

Much of the laughter in The Way of the World is provided by Sir Wilfull with his ridiculous behaviour and mannerisms. Congreve exposes the snobbishness of urban society through the character of Sir Wilfull and

how he is looked down upon by the refined society. Millamant has nothing but contempt for him, and he behaves like a buffoon in her presence. However, even though he may lack the social finesse, Sir Wilfull's commonsense and honesty is a sharp antithesis of Witwoud's sham personality. He willingly tries to help Mirabell and Millamant when they are in trouble, and displays courage in defying Fainall's "Instrument" by drawing his sword, and preventing him from attacking his wife. Congreve shows that Sir Wilfull has values even though he may be a boor, and also, unlike his brother, he never sacrifices the integrity of his nature.

Thus, Congreve follows a symmetry in balancing the characters and the movement of the plot. The ideal pair of lovers, Mirabell and Millamant is balanced by the adulterous pair, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Above them is Lady Wishfort who lives in a total illusion of having the wedded bliss, and between them is Mrs. Fainall, who lives in a disillusioned reality of an unhappy marriage. Lady Wishfort with her legal control over everyone's fortune, is the root of all disharmony and confusion, but antithetically, she also holds all the characters and the play together, including Sir Wilfull, Witwoud and Petulant in the implications of family relationships.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Can you call Mirabell a perfect character?

Q 8: Do you agree that Congreve presents the characters in a balanced way ?

Q 9: What role does Mrs. Wishfort play in the plot of the play?



15.6 LET US SUM UP

As you have finished reading the unit, you have learnt that the play The Way of the World is one of Congreve's most famous plays. It is centred on the two lovers Mirabell and Millamant. However, the play is concerned with the problem of social living. The plot of the play is built upon a "legacy

of conflict" as the institutions of wealth and power control modern organised society. All the characters become obsessed with acquiring wealth 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, finally she is turned into a helpless pawn at the hands of mischief-makers as she misuses her power. The plots and counter-plots in the play also revolve around the problem of the legal extraction of Lady Wishfort's wealth. Thus, this play throws light on many of the social aspects of the 17th century English society.



15.7 FURTHER READING

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15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Mirabell loves Millamant, and in order to marry her, he must win the consent of Lady Wishfort… …Mrs. Marwood exposes Mirabell as the former rejected her advances… …Lady Wishfort now hates Mirabell and resolves to deprive her niece Millamant of the half of her inheritance which is in her keeping if Millamant marries Mirabell… …this is what sets the main story in motion.

Ans to Q No 2: Yes,… …Mrs. Marwood informs Lady Wishfort that she suspects Mirabell is up to some mischief… …Marwood secretly overhears the conversation between Foible and Mrs. Fainall, as they discuss the mischievous plot and also make a passing reference to Mrs. Fainall's earlier affair with Mirabell… …in this situation Congreve holds back the movement of the plot by introducing Sir Wilfull and the suspense and apprehension of the readers are sustained throughout the rest of Act III.

Ans to Q No 3: In the "Proviso" scene, Congreve conveys with absolute delicacy the infinite superficiality of Mirabell and Millamant and their... …Mrs. Marwood's anonymous letter to Lady Wishfort discloses the imposture of Sir Rowland, but Foible and Waitwell quickly try to avert a catastrophe by thinking up an excuse…. …the "Proviso" scene holds the suspense in the play.

Ans to Q No 4: It is very obvious that the play is concerned with the problem of social living and it is established straightaway by the title "the way of the world"… …this phrase has been repeated differently throughout the play… …it means that man has to survive according to the dictates of the world he lives in.

Ans to Q No 5: A modern organised society is controlled by the institutions of wealth and power… …Lady Wishfort appears to be important as she seems to have control over the wealth… …but 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 many mischief makers.

Ans to Q No 6: The fools and the knaves… …the fools like Petulant and Witwoud 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.

Ans to Q No 7: Mirabell is the Truewit of his age and possess all the characteristics of the urbane gentleman… …his seriousness and ethical nature distinguishes him from the other characters in the

play…. …but Congreve has made us suspect Mirabell's relationship with Mrs. Fainall by making him protect her wealth, and reputation... ... therefore, Mirabell cannot be called a perfect person as Congreve's realistic assessment of life does not allow for perfection in man.

Ans to Q No 8: It is very obvious… …the ideal pair of lovers, Mirabell and Millamant is balanced by the adulterous pair, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood… …on the other hand, Lady Wishfort's illusions and assumed bliss is contrasted against Mrs. Fainall's disillusionment of an unhappy marriage.

Ans to Q No 9: Lady Wishfort is perhaps that character who controls everyone's fortunes… …although she is rich and imaginative, the decay of her youthful beauty mars her intelligence and makes her vulnerable… …she is secretly envious of her niece, Millamant's beauty which finally leads to the main intrigues of the play.

15.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Millamant does not want to "dwindle into a Wife" and Mirabell also does not wish to "be beyond Measure enlarg'd into a Husband". Consider their relationships in terms of these comments.

Q 2: Discuss the characters of Mrs. Marwood and Fainall. How will you define their relationship?

Q 3: From your reading of the play what ideas do you have of the relationship between men and women in the 17th century England?

Q 4: Do you consider *The Way of The World* an intrigue comedy or a comedy of manners?

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