

Semester –II

Paper Code – 201-ENGH-C-3

Paper Name – British Literature; 18<sup>th</sup> Century

William Congreve

*The Way of the World*

### **General Introduction**

William Congreve was born in 1670, ten years after Charles II, stepped ashore in England and became at last, in the eyes of the world, Monarch of England. The Restoration Age stretches from 1660, through the reigns of Charles II and his brother James II, beyond the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The sixteenth century had been an age of Wonder and excitement, rather than awareness of the real significance of the cultural ferment that was shaking Europe, and the Elizabethan, for all his totality of view, tended to direct his eyes upwards to visions of grandeur rather than to the actualities of existence. It was not till the middle of the seventeenth century that the true meaning of the Renaissance was finally established –its new philosophy that ‘called all in doubt’, its spirit of enquiry, its science and its skepticism. The new age thus turned its gaze from heaven to earth, from implicit faith in the supernatural to rational analysis of empirical facts from the why to how of existence, from the glorification of God to the assessment of man. The rational element was quite prominent in the writings of the period. Alexander Pope writes in the *Essay on Man*:

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,

The proper study of mankind is Man”.

Further Dryden, the great spokesperson of his age writes: “A man should be learned in several sciences, and should have a reasonable, philosophical, and in some measure, a mathematical head, to be a complete and excellent poet”. So the emphasis is on a rational and objective, as opposed to an emotional, approach to life and the writers of the period turned to prose as the most natural medium of

expression. Prose itself changed its nature and the rhetorical, luxuriant prose of the Commonwealth was gradually replaced by a simpler, more direct language.

If the rational faculty had become the instrument of the mind, and simple prose its medium of expression, the subject matter for contemplation was man's material existence or his immediate environment- in other words, the social milieu in which he lives. Thus society becomes the major concern of the seventeenth century writer; in its well – being lay the well-being of man. The seventeenth century and the eighteenth century writer is acutely conscious of his responsibility towards society-he is the guardian of its morality, the upholder of its values. He is 'committed', and his task is to establish order in human society and teach men and women to live together in a civilized manner.

The spirit of rational enquiry and criticism found its voice in satire, and notable examples are Butler's *Hudibras*, Rochester's *Satire against Mankind*, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* and *Mac Flecknoe*, and Defoe's *The true – Born Englishman*. The age is best expressed in its comedies. Although there are tragedies of Dryden and Lee but the satirical expressions of the age, emphasis on social values find a wonderful expression in the comic spirit that aims at the reconciliation of self and society, and the establishment of a balanced way of life.

### **Restoration Comedy:**

#### **What is Comedy?**

Comedy is a literary genre and a type of dramatic work that is amusing and satirical in its tone, mostly having a cheerful ending. The motif of this dramatic work is triumph over unpleasant circumstance by creating comic effects, resulting in a happy or successful conclusion. Comedy implies a social attitude to life. It does not preclude sympathy with the individual, but however great the sympathy, the social pattern is always given greater significance. The moral concern of the comic philosopher is the preservation of society, even if it means the expulsion of the individual, for without society mankind cannot survive. To achieve his end the comic philosopher may resort to laughter for it renders ridiculous, and therefore impotent, all those who do not conform to the social pattern. However laughter is not his only instrument and it is never his aim, and those who employ laughter for

its own sake become, in turn, the objects of ridicule. This is the basis of all great comedy, but the treatment changes from age to age.

### **Different types of Comedies**

a) **Classical Comedies** – Plautus and Terence were primarily concerned with the exposure of social aberrants and they were satirical in tone. Although love often formed an element in the actual plot construction, emotion was excluded from their plays.

b) **Romantic Comedies** – Shakespeare through his romantic comedies take us to another world where emotion and imagination play a far greater role. As against Hamlet, Lear and Othello, who were idealists unable to compromise, we have Portia, Beatrice and Rosalind, capable of deep emotion, but at the same time, sensible realists who know how to adjust to their environment.

c) **Comedy of Humours** – Ben Jonson takes up the comic mode of Plautus and Terence in his Comedy of Humours. Johnson's 'humour' originates in the medieval physiological theory that the human body comprises four chief fluids or 'humours', and that an imbalance in the proportion and distribution of the fluids results in a corresponding imbalance in the mental condition and disposition of the individual. Johnson's plays deal with people in whom a dominant trait has disturbed the equipoise of their minds. In a sense he is an individualist, because he is primarily concerned with character, and his comedy of humours explores the moral and emotional recesses of human nature. For example in *The Alchemist*, Face and Subtle could, in fact belong to any age and any country.

d) **Comedy of Manners** – Restoration comedy is better known as 'the comedy of manners' because it mirrored directly the manners, modes, and morals of the upper-class society which was its main audience. The main subject of Restoration comedy was sex: sexual attraction, sexual intrigue, and sexual conquest. Sex, and the search for sex, becomes entertainment.

## Restoration Comedy

Let us discuss in details the restoration comedy and how it is different from comedy of humours. Johnson had belonged to an individualistic age, but the restoration dramatists lived in a more sophisticated one in which conformity had become the rule rather than the exception, and this gave rise to problems of a different nature. What we observe in the restoration period is a pressure towards conformity that we find it is no longer the individual who is threatening the existence of society, but society itself, or rather its degraded form, that threatens to destroy individualism in man.

Restoration Comedy thus becomes more concerned with the aberrations of the group than with the aberrations of the individual, and this accounts for the fact that it belongs unmistakably to the age in which it was written. It emphasizes the immediate and actual social framework, and it has been called the Comedy of Manners because it deals with the manners of the age. The task of the Restoration dramatist is to distinguish between false manners and true manners, to separate pseudo-intelligence from intelligence, to distinguish a 'Wit-woud' from 'Truewit'. He is fighting to preserve the sanity of the intellect, and the moral bludgeon that Jonson wielded is replaced by the sharper instrument of wit.

Restoration comedy includes the plays of Wycherley, Etherege and William Congreve and the comedies of Dryden.

Dryden : He was the eldest one and he was born in 1631. His notable publications are – *The Wild Gallant* (1663), followed by *Sir Martin Mar-All* (1667), *The Assination or Love in a Nunnery* (1672) and *Marriage – à-la-Mode* (1672). His last comedy, *Amphitryon*, was produced in 1690.

Sir George Etherege (1634- 1691) is the next in line, with *The Comical Revenge*, or *Love in a Tub* (1664), *She Wou'd if She Cou'd* (1668), and his last and best comedy, *The Man of Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676).

Wycherley won fame with *The Country Wife* (1675), but before this had come *Love in a Wood* or *St. Jame's Park* (1671) and *The Gentleman Dancing – Master* (1672). His last comedy is *The Plain Dealer* (1676).

William Congreve (1670-1729) is the greatest of them all. His first play *The Old Bachelour* was produced in 1693 and it won instant acclaim. This was followed by *The Double Dealer* in the same year and *Love for Love* (1695). Congreve experimented with tragedy in *The Mourning Bride* in 1697 and at the turn of the century came *The Way of the World* (1700). It was Congreve's last play and masterpiece and the finest flower of Restoration Comedy.

The other dramatists of the period are Sir John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar. The masterpiece of John Vanbrugh is *The Provok'd Wife* and Farquhar's masterpiece is *Beaux Stratagem*.

### **Characteristics of Restoration Comedies:**

1) When we read the Restoration Comedies our first impression is that we have left ordinary people behind us and entered the closed and charmed world of the fashionable beau –monde. The setting is always London; elegant ladies and handsome gentlemen live a life of languid luxury and pass the day making witty conversation with each other. The ladies are always appreciated by their male admirers. There are two major preoccupations of the period-sex and marriage as there is infinite leisure everywhere during the period. Men are always ready to have affair, and ladies, married or otherwise are equally ready to give them indulgence.

2) Rural England, does not present a very impressive picture in the comedies as the comedies primarily deal with sophisticated and fashionable people.

3) Whatever one's private emotions are, the social game insists that a perfect façade must be maintained. Husbands and Wives may hate each other, but in company Fainall greets Mrs. Fainall with 'My Dear', and she replies 'My Soul'. Women may eye each other with suspicion and distrust, but in public they always affect a friendship that they do not feel.

4) The Restoration Comedy came to be described as 'Artificial Comedy' as people literally forgot to behave in a natural way. The only norm they followed was that of "Manners", or the observance of social proprieties. The comedies depicted most realistically their artificial society.

5) The language of Restoration comedy is characterized by debonair wit.

6) Compared to Johnsonian Comedies, the Restoration comedies may not be as moralistic, sententious or didactic.

7) Restoration Comedies have been criticized on the grounds of dissoluteness and licentiousness.

#### Success of William Congreve -

Despite all the criticisms against Restoration Comedies for its licentiousness, immorality, dull and insipid nature; William Congreve emerges as a successful dramatist among all the contemporaries for his acute observation of the social and emotional pressures on characters who are more richly drawn than traditional stereotypes. Like many later writers of comedy; Congreve was something of an outsider, having been brought up in Ireland, and perhaps the outsider's eye gave him a privileged viewpoint on the society he portrayed with such insight, sympathy, and wit.

**(Analysis of the drama and other critical observations will be discussed in the next study material)**

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