

MIC ENGLISH, SEM-VI

Themes in The Way of The World

In Congreve's play, jealousy, deceit, and intrigue are important and interrelated plot devices that drive the action of the play by creating conflict between characters. In many ways, the play can be thought of as a competition between Mirabell and Fainall to deceive the other by means of opposing schemes to gain control of Lady Wishfort and her fortune. Each man is assisted in his plan to outdo the other. Fainall has one helper, his mistress, Mrs. Marwood, while several major and minor characters participate in Mirabell's plan to win Millamant as his bride and retain her love and inheritance.

Congreve's most duplicitous characters, those carrying on affairs and scheming against love because of their own unrequited love, are themselves the most jealous. Jealousy is a huge motivator for the adulterers, Fainall and Marwood, and also Lady Wishfort to plot and scheme against Mirabell. Both Marwood and Wishfort start off in love with Mirabell, but because he does not return their sentiments, their all-consuming jealousy of him leads them to hate him and plot to ruin his future with Millamant. Fainall is also jealous of Mirabell because he fears his popularity with women, particularly that Marwood still loves Mirabell, and also because Mirabell threatens to gain some of Wishfort's fortune by marrying Millamant.

In portraying how jealousy motivates these characters to behave as they do, Congreve develops several lessons about jealousy's negative effects. In the end, all overly jealous characters end up not getting what they want: revenge against Mirabell. For Fainall, his lack of honesty causes him to distrust the honesty of others and doubt his mistress, which ultimately hurts his plan because he alienates his only ally. Marwood's case is a lesson in what happens when one tries to thwart too many people at once. Though she wants to help Fainall secure Wishfort's money, she also wants to get back at Mirabell by any means necessary. Her jealousy blinds her to the consequences of developing her own separate plans to prevent Mirabell's marriage to Millamant. After suggesting to Lady Wishfort that Millamant marry Sir Rowland, her move threatens the success of Fainall's plot and the couple has to work much harder to try to gain the fortune. Wishfort's jealousy leads her to

play right into the hands of both Fainall and Mirabell. So eager is she to hurt Mirabell and prevent him from marrying Millamant that she thinks she's more in control of the situation than she actually is. Instead of playing Mirabell, she gets played by other people, several of whom are below her station as a lady but are more than her superiors in wit, like Foible.

In contrast, though jealousy also affects Mirabell, he is not consumed by it and doesn't feel threatened by the presence of Millamant's other suitors. Consequently, he is able to keep two steps ahead of Fainall and gets Lady Wishfort to comply with his plan.

In addition to jealousy, deception and intrigue also contribute to the rising action that makes the play both engaging and suspenseful. As the main conflict between Mirabell and Fainall develops, it becomes clear that almost every character has something to hide. Deception is practiced in obvious ways, such as when characters don full-on disguises, like Mirabell's servant, Waitwell, who pretends to be Sir Rowland, or when habitual liars, like Petulant, continue to tell tall tales. But Congreve also examines subtler forms of deception, including self-deception, like in the case of Lady Wishfort, who uses too much makeup to hide her age from her suitor, Sir Rowland, but also herself. Another subtler form of deception is psychological deception, a type of deception Marwood especially utilizes as she pretends to be Wishfort's best friend, while scheming for ways to steal her fortune, or when she convinces Fainall of her faithfulness even though she still cares for Mirabell.

Congreve even uses deception and intrigue to structure his play. The secret marriage of Foible and Waitwell (which occurs in the first act but is not explained until Act 2, Scene 4) and even Mrs. Fainall's secret deed of conveyance to Mirabell, revealed at the end of the play, are examples of deception and intrigue that not only affect other characters within the play but also delight the unsuspecting audience/reader.