**Themes of Twelfth Night**

(For B.A. 2nd Semester, Honours)

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A theme is an overarching idea that runs through a literary text in one or some parts. It makes up the major point the author wants to convey to his readers. William Shakespeare also used wide ranging themes in his world famous play Twelfth Night. Some of the major themes of Twelfth Night have been discussed below.

Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night is one of his last romantic comedies or Happy comedies. This much loved play is famous for the amusing gulling of Malvolio, and imbued with a delicate dream like air of fantastic romance, carries also a dying fall, a strain of melancholy music. It’s ending, which leaves at least one aspiring lover without fulfillment, and another threatening universal revenge, cannot be seen as unreservedly happy or festive.

**Love as a cause of suffering**: Twelfth Night is a romantic comedy, and romantic love is the play’s main focus. Despite the fact that the play offers a happy ending, in which the various lovers find one another and achieve wedded bliss, Shakespeare shows that love can cause pain. Many of the characters of the play seem to view love as a kind of curse, a feeling that attacks its victims suddenly and disruptly. At one point, Orsino depicts love dolefully as an appetite that he wants to satisfy and cannot; at another point, he calls his desires ‘fell and cruel hounds’. Olivia more bluntly describes love as a ‘plague’ from which she suffers terribly. These metaphors contain an element of violence, further painting the love-struck as victims of some random force in the universe. The desperation in love even results in violence when Orsino threatens to kill Cesario because he thinks that Cesario has forsaken him to become Olivia’s lover.

**The uncertainty of gender**: Gender is one of the most obvious and much discussed topics in the play. Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare’s so called transvestite comedies, in which a female character-in this case, Viola-disguises herself as a men. This situation creates a sexual mess. Viola falls in love with Orsino but cannot tell him, because he thinks she is a man, while Olivia, the object of Orsino’s affection falls for Viola in her guise as Cesario. There is a clear homoerotic subtext here; Olivia is in love with a woman, even if she thinks he is a man, and Orsino often remarks on Cesario’s beauty, suggesting that he is attracted to Viola even before her male disguise is removed. This latent homoeroticism finds an explicit echo in the minor character of Antonio, who is clearly in love with his male friend, Sebastian.

**The folly of ambition**: The problem of social ambition works itself out largely through the character of Malvolio, the Steward, who seems to be a complement servant, if prudish and dour, but proves to be, in fact, a supreme egotist, with tremendous ambitions to rise out of his social class. Maria plays on these ambitions when she forgets a letter from Olivia that makes Malvolio believe that Olivia in love with him and wishes to marry him. Sir Toby and the others find this fantasy hysterically funny not only because of Malvolio’s unattractive personality but also because Malvolio is not of noble blood. In the class system of Shakespeare’s time a noblewoman would generally not sully her reputation by marrying a man of lower social rank. The feast of Twelfth Night, from which the play takes its name, was a time when social hierarchies were turned upside down. The same spirit was alive in Illyria; indeed, Malvolio’s antagonist, Maria, is able to increase her social standing by marrying Sir Toby. But it seems that Maria’s success may be due to her willingness to accept and promote the anarchy that Sir Toby and the others embrace.

**Madness**: The theme of madness in Twelfth Night often overlaps the themes of desire and love. Orsino talks about the faculty of love producing multiple changing images of the beloved, similar to hallucinations. Olivia remarks at certain points that desire for Cesario is making her mad. These examples of madness are mostly metaphorical: madness becomes a way for characters to express the intensity of their romantic feelings. But the play also has multiple characters that seem to go literally mad. As part of the prank that Maria, Sir Toby, and Fabian play on Malvolio, they convince everyone that he is crazy. The confusion that results from characters mixing up Viola/Cesario and Sebastian, after Sebastian’s arrival in Illyria, also leads many of them to think that they have lost their minds. It is interesting to note that madness is actually intertwined with the sanity of the characters. It is also similar to chaos.

**Disguise**: Viola disguises her true identity and pretends to be a man, Cesario. Maria and Sir Toby’s pranks is also a disguise of their severe hatred towards him. They tease Malvolio to make others laugh at his lovesickness. On the other hand, Feste becomes a scholar, Sir Topas. Olivia and Orsino also disguise their unrequited love.

**Death**: Death also forms a major theme in the play. Olivia refuses to love Orsino because she mourns the death of her brother and father. On the other hand, Viola and Sebastian, who are brother and sister, also mourn the loss of each other’s supposed death.

Twelfth Night continues to interest and delight audiences, its characters, even the lesser ones, attract major actors to play them, and its themes continue to hold relevance so many years after Shakespeare wrote it.

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