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Topic: Twelfth Night as a Romantic Comedy

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TWELFTH NIGHT AS A ROMANTIC COMEDY

William Shakespeare [1564-1616]

William Shakespeare stands unchallenged as the greatest English poet-dramatist who deserves Ben Jonson’s proclamation that - "He was not of an age, but for all time!" Shakespeare continues to speak to us, generations after generations, throughout the countries and cultures of the world. Shakespeare’s contributions are still so contemporary, so very modern, posing fundamental questions that have become particularly relevant in the present scenario. Traditionally, Shakespeare play types are categorized as Comedy, History, Roman and Tragedy. Shakespeare comedies are generally identifiable as plays full of fun, irony and dazzling wordplay. They also abound in disguises and mistaken identities, with very complicated plots with happy endings.
**Definition of 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, leading to a happy ending.

Comedy is a genre that has been followed by playwrights since the ancient Sanskrit and Greek drama. Later, Aristotle divided the comedy into farce, satire and romantic comedy. In general, comedy is meant to provide humour and laughter to the audience. However, English comedy changed in definition as it meant a happy ending despite the strife felt by the characters.

**Definition of a Romantic Comedy**

Romantic comedy is a subgenre of comedy and slice-of-life fiction, focusing on lighthearted, humorous plot lines centered on romantic ideas like how true love is able to overcome most obstacles. A romantic comedy is a type of play which consists of love affair between the characters mainly protagonist, difficulties that arise due to the affairs, the struggle of the protagonist or other major characters to overcome these difficulties and the ending that is generally happy to everyone. Several of these comedies end either at a festival or a feast or a gathering where everyone is joyous or becomes joyous. Thus, Romantic comedy involves a theme of love leading to a happy conclusion.

“The Twelfth Night as a Romantic Comedy”

The world of Shakespearean comedy says Raleigh is a “rainbow world of love in idleness”. J.C Maxwell observes;” . . . Twelfth Night is justly praised as a masterpiece of stagecraft and is perhaps the most popular work of Shakespearean comedy."

Shakespeare's romantic comedy is fundamentally different from the classical comedy of manners which is a realistic comedy. Classical comedy aims at exposing social morality and ridiculing the oddities of individual or of a social institution.
The Shakespearean comedy is Romantic not only in the sense that it does not observe the classical rules of dramatic composition, but also in the sense that it provides an escape from the sordid realities of life.

Shakespeare’s romantic comedies are all conceived in an imaginative setting far away from the dull and dreary world of everyday life. Their characters are also different from us as they are inhabitants of not our humdrum world but the imaginary, colorful world of their own.

The romantic comedies of Shakespeare can be otherwise called as “comedies of incidents” or “comedies of mistaken identity”. The plot is often driven by mistaken identity. Characters play scenes in disguise and it’s common for female characters to disguise themselves as male characters.

The action takes place is some distant far off land and not in the familiar everyday England. The dramatic transport on the wings of his imagination in the Forest of Arden, to the stories of Illyria to an ancient forest in Greece can be found. In this land of romance and enchantment, the inhabitants have no other work but that of love-making.

Twelfth Night is a typical romantic comedy of Shakespeare. Its various features are mentioned below:

FEATURES OF ROMANTIC COMEDY IN TWELFTH NIGHT:

1. Love is the main theme

A Shakespearean comedy is a romantic comedy. In Twelfth Night, Shakespeare has treated love as main theme. All the principal characters in the play are passionately in love. They have no other business but that of love-making. The play opens on a note of love. At the very beginning of the play and in the starting dialogue, Orsino says-

“If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, the surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.”
Thus, the Duke is love-sick. Passionate love expressed in poetical language. Love also dominates the hearts of Sir Andrew and Malvolio. They both love Lady Olivia and want to marry her. In this way, the treatment of this theme makes the play even more romantic.

A Shakespearean comedy is the story of love ending with the ringing of marriage bells. Not only the hero or the heroine is in love but all other characters are also in love. And so, in the end there is not one marriage but a number of marriages. The entire atmosphere echoes filled with love. The lovers are all young people and everyone fall in love at first sight. This desire of the eyes is exhibited in many beautiful forms finally leading to unexpected goals.

2. Setting

We know that the setting of a Shakespearean comedy is romantic and imaginative. It is far removed from reality. It is generally, unfamiliar, remote and distance. It exists only in the imagination of the dramatist. The scene of action is not laid in familiar and realistic London. But it occurs in Venice or in the Forest of Arden. The scene of action of Twelfth Night is Illyria. Actually, Illyria is a country having no reality. But it exists only in the imagination of the playwright. It is in such a romantic setting that the character dance the merry dance of love. Whereas by the end, they are happily united with their lovers.

3. Music

Though love is the dominating theme in Twelfth Night. But music comes next in importance. Love of music is also a romantic quality. Most of the songs in the play are provided by the Clown or the fool. Thus, the play opens with music. We find that the Duke feeds his love with music. He is a man of a genuine musical taste. He likes sentimental melodies which deal with the subject of love and death. Even Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are fond of music. Thus, music does much to heighten the romantic atmosphere of the comedy.

4. Disguise or Mistaken Identity

Disguise or mistaken identity is another important element in the plot construction of a romantic comedy and produces, a great deal of mirth and gaiety, fun and humor.

Viola, the heroine of the drama disguises herself as a boy, Cesario and appears before Orsino, The Duke of Illyria for her livelihood. While serving Orsino, she falls in love with
him. Orsino loves another lady Olivia and Olivia loves Viola who is in disguise of a boy named Cesario. Thus, we see that love and disguise are the main themes and provides the main dramatic interest as well as the fun and gaiety in the drama.

The disguise is of two types—Physical and Mental.

Physical disguise is used for Viola who dresses up as a man and calls herself Cesario.

Mental disguise is self-disguise. Many characters appear to be what they are not. For example, Olivia says that she won’t see the face of any man as she is mourning the death of her brother, but she cannot help falling in love with Cesario who is Viola dressed as a boy. So, she is a victim of self-disguise.

In the same way, Orsino says he is a great lover, pining for Olivia but actually he is only a lover in love with the idea of love. Thus, Olivia and Orsino are wearing mental or self-disguise. In the end, they see their real self. Olivia marries Sebastian and Orsino marries Viola.

5. Cross wooing

Duke Orsino is determined to woo Countess Olivia in one way or another and he sends Viola, now known as Cesario, to do it on his behalf. Now, Viola has fallen in love with Orsino at first sight. The next we know is that Olivia, has fallen in love with Cesario. Thus, we see cross wooing is an integral part in the development of plot in Twelfth Night. The above figure summarizes it clearly.

6. Rejects Classical Unities of Time, Place and Action

Twelfth Night is also romantic in the sense that it does not follow the classical unities of time, place and action. Here the unity of place has only been observed. There is no unity of time or action. There is no one plot in the play but two plots. The tragic
and the comic scenes are also mingled. The main plot is serious and tragic in tone. On the other hand, the sub-plot is entirely comic. Thus, there is no unity of action in the play. There is no unity of time because the action of the play is spread over many days and is not limited only to twenty-four hours.

7. Confrontation of Realism and Romance

Confrontation of realism and romance is another quality of Twelfth Night. It makes the play romantic. Moreover, several situations in this play are highly improbable. A romantic play is generally unrealistic; improbabilities enter a romantic play for the power of imagination. A dramatist’s imagination creates situations which may not occur in real life. In this play Sebastian and Viola are separated from each other for a ship-wreck. A ship-wreck is a distinct possibility. But brother and sister land safely in the same sea-coast, the coast of Illyria. They go to the same place, Duke Orsino’s court, to try their luck. This is certainly improbable.

8. Unhappy Beginning and Happy Ending

A Shakespearean Comedy moves from shadow to sunshine. It starts with some problems that make the union of the lover difficult. But it ends with their happy union. The background is always Exile, Dispossession and Death. The foreground is occupied by pairs of lovers and the only activity taken seriously is courtship ending in marriage. All play starts with a lot of unhappiness in background but they all finally end in happiness. All knots are unravelled in the end.
9. Heroines have more important roles

Another important aspect of Shakespearean romantic comedy is that the heroines surpass the heroes. Unlike his tragedy in which heroes predominate, in his comedies it is his heroines who play a leading role. The Women in Shakespearean comedy constitute its very soul. The tragic heroines of Shakespeare simply pale into insignificance by the side of the grand heroes of the play. But in his comedies, the reverse is true. A critic remarks that in Shakespeare’s comedies there are no heroes at all; there are only heroines. George Gordon observes: “All, lectures on Shakespeare’s comedies tend to become lectures on Shakespeare’s “women, for in
the comedies they have the front of the stage”. In Shakespeare’s comedies we meet with women of all ranks and ages. Shakespeare’s comic heroines are much more sparkling and interesting than their male counterparts. We have the vivacious and intelligent Portia, the witty Beau in the constant Viola and the charming Rosalind. Bassanio does not come to the level of Portia, Benedick pales in wit beside Beatrice. Though all these heroines in their character do not have the same pattern, yet they have in common one important characteristic—their perfect quality of womanhood. This quality makes them look surprisingly modern. Viola and Olivia have stronger roles than Orsino or Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*.

**10. Clowns/Fools are a part of these comedies**

Shakespearean comedies are filled with comical characters and circumstances; in fact, a “fool is conventional in Shakespearean comedy”. The clown or fools have significant roles to play in the dramas. The fool’s function is not only to initiate laughter in the play, in addition; they reveal fundamental truths often overlooked by others. To summarize, the words of fools appeal not to the mind but to the heart. Feste is one of the most significant characters in Shakespeare’s comedies. From
his amusing introduction to his final solemn song Feste is always present during the key events of the play.

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