



**BLEND OF COMEDY AND ROMANCE IN  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT***



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**ABSTRACT :** William Shakespeare is considered as the supreme dramatist in the history of English language and literature. His plays were written to be performed on the stage rather than to be read and his plays were meant to entertain a special kind of audience, alert and imaginative landowners. In *Twelfth Night*, there is a constant and continuous intermingling of high romance and hilarious comedy. Every part of the play is thus exemplary of the comic and romantic traditions at their highest. Even the sub-plot of the play is woven with the threads of fun and laughter. *Twelfth Night* has rightly been called the comedy of comedies, for it combines so many excellences, and combines them so skillfully. The comedy of *Twelfth Night* is both relieved and heightened by an exquisite romance, interwoven with the comic undertones.

**KEYWORDS :** Comedy, Romance, Fun, Laughter, Intermingling, Hilarious Comedy

## RESEARCH PAPER

It is universally admitted that William Shakespeare, the remarkable and unequalled playwright of English Literature had acquired varied knowledge and experience of life as shown in his plays. Jonathan Bate remarks, "Shakespeare has come to be looked upon as the supreme expression not only of the English race but of the whole world" (Bate 89). While studying the works of Shakespeare, it is important to mention that his plays were originally written not to be read but to be performed, that they contain a great deal of poetry and because they were written over four hundred years ago. Peter Dawkins rightly points out, "Shakespeare uses his plays to mirror society not only his own, but also ours, since so many of the issues and characteristics portrayed are still true today" (Dawkins 118)

In this paper, my focus is to highlight the attributes of the comedy and romance in Shakespeare's world famous play *Twelfth Night*. But before discussing the play from this perspective, it will be significant to mention that The Elizabethan playhouse for which Shakespeare wrote had little in common with the theatre of today. Even in the absence of the modern stage facilities like the artificial lights, curtains, dressing rooms, painted scenery etc., Shakespeare's theatre was adequate for his needs. Above all, it must be kept in mind that the special atmosphere and the dramatic effect were created by the writer's pen. Thus, it is to the Elizabethan stage that we are indebted in great measure for the exquisite descriptive poetry of Shakespeare. His plays were written to be performed on the stage rather than to be read and his plays were meant to entertain a special kind of audience, alert and imaginative landowners. But we should not forget that Shakespeare staged his plays not only on the platform of the theatre but also in the lively minds of the men and women in his audience. Alfred Bates proclaims, "Shakespeare possessed a rich treasure of knowledge of various fields without any training, based on mere intuition and observation. He embellished his writing with a choice store of illustrations descriptive of the period in which he lived" (Bates 74). For Shakespeare, a play was not a few printed pages of dialogue but a vivid mimetic presentation of human conflict and there is no exaggeration in saying that whether in comedies or tragedies or any other plays, Shakespeare probes deeply into the complexities of life. It is worth mentioning that when Shakespeare took the form of drama in his hands, it was ripe for high fulfilments. The English language also was at a point of rich potential in terms of its historical development and the result of his remarkable combination was a rich harvest of plays, an achievement that has remained unparalleled ever since.

*Twelfth Night* is considered to be one of the best comedies of Shakespeare, belonging to the middle group of comedies which are commonly known as 'Sunny Comedies' and are completely free from the immaturities of early comedies like *Love's Labour Lost*, *Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* nor they have the seriousness of his later comedies like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well*. These 'Sunny Comedies' of the middle phase represent the dramatist at his happiest, and they are ranked among the greatest comedies of the world. *Twelfth Night* embodies exquisite feelings of wonder in the principal characters of the play. In the traditional romantic stories, the course of true love does not run smooth because of obstacles arising from unexpected quarters. Sometimes suitable situations arise with characters who are from the beginning full of devotion to an ideal of love, but they mistake the direction in which it should be sought. This is surely the case with Orsino and Olivia. The play begins with Duke Orsino who draws us from the start into the aura of his imagination. Perhaps he is the most perfect of Shakespeare's romantic lovers and at the same time volatile and steadfast, Orsino combines in himself such diverse aspects of man's nature.

His choice of Olivia is consciously made a lady fit for the Duke. The choice once made captures his imagination completely, and henceforth admits of no obstacle whatsoever. He feels that his message of love, sent through his courtier Valentine would soon be answered with an equal warmth by the young Countess. But the course of love does not run in mathematical straight lines. Olivia too, has a highly romantic nature but she is not at all touched by this academic approach to love making. Moreover, she has in the loss of her brother, a worldly cause strong enough for her to turn down this royal offer. She declares that she will abjure the company and sight of men and that she will go veiled to the sky for seven long years. Indeed, no play is more exclusively and more fantastically cheerful. Were it not for a few passages in which the depths of human nature are sounded, it would seem to be the out breaking of a young man's fancy and jollity. It touches alike the most delicate fantasies of love, and the most honest breadth of jovial humour.

In fact, for his festival entertainment, Shakespeare freshly organised all the usual material of the romances - the twins, the exile in an unknown land, and the impersonations, a series of masks put on by various persons in the play. Every character has a mask, for the assumption of the play is that on one is without a mask in the serious-comic business of the pursuit of happiness. The character without disguises who is not ridiculous is outside the realm of comedy. Within

comedy, the character who thinks it is possible to live without assuming a mask is merely too naive to recognise the mask he has already assumed. This explains the odd character of Malvolio who becomes the chief object of fun and laughter. As a rule, we laugh with the characters who know the role they are playing and we also laugh at those who do not know themselves.

There is no doubt that in *Twelfth Night*, there is a constant and continuous intermingling of high romance and hilarious comedy. The high seriousness of the Duke's wooing by persistent messages and garrulous love-messengers on the one side, and summary dismissal of this love-suit by the young and dazzlingly beautiful but veiled Olivia, on the other, is not only a picture of high romance but it also provides fun and entertainment to the audience. This fun becomes all the more enjoyable when they find that the self denying Olivia falls in love at the first sight with the young and charming page-boy, Cesario who comes to woo her on behalf of the Duke. Here the comic situation arises for the audience who know that this page-boy is no one else but a young woman, Viola by name. In this way, this romantic scene changes into a comic situation when one woman ardently woos another woman to be her husband. No amount of loud and hilarious laughter is adequate enough to equal the comic out-turn of this unprecedented situation. And to make matters still more complicated, Shakespeare has made Viola fall in love with the Duke. The poor lady, disguised as she is a page-boy can but express her only in an indirect manner which is fully understood by the audience, but not by the Duke. Viola's romance, therefore, appears to be futile, and it is almost a helpless cry that she utters, when she says:

"I will do my best  
To woo your lady - (Aside) Yet, a barful strife!  
Whoe're I woo, myself would be his wife".

(Act 1 Scene IV 38-40)

and again:

"Disguise, I see thou are a wickedness,  
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.  
How easy is it for the proper false  
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms".

(Act II Scene II 25-29)

and still again:

"O Time, thou must untangle this, not I,

It is too hard a knot for me to untie". (Act II *Scene II* 39-40)

The traditional love-triangle is not only doubled in this story, but also it is short circuited twice. Even at the end of Act I, the romantic situation boils down to this: Orsino loves Olivia; Olivia loves Viola (Cesario), and Viola loves Orsino and in this way, the romantic round-about becomes a real comic situation. The audience gets into suspense, not knowing how the romance will ultimately come to fruition. Only a superpower could resolve such a puzzled issue and finally, it is chance alone that decides the matter. Sebastian has escaped from the ship wreck, unknown to Viola, and is befriended by Antonio, who risks his own life to accompany his friend, and they appear in Illyria, not a minute too soon, to have Viola from the most ugly situation. The duel scene, but for Antonio in the first part, and then without Sebastian in the second part, would have proved dangerous for the disguised Viola and it is possible that her disguise would have been removed in a disgraceful manner. This element of chance and fate is in the true traditions of high romance. This duel scene is also very comical because the chicken hearted Sir Andrew gets a blow or two for his attempting too much. Moreover, Sir Toby does not escape unhurt as his bandaged forehead makes him truly a laughing stock for the galleries, and even Olivia takes notice of that. In this context of the play, the remarks of Gordon McMullan are noteworthy, "In Shakespeare's plays, one finds a truly intrinsic weaving of contemporary English societal fabric. Women of the Elizabethan Era were imparted considerable liberty and as a result, they were less hesitant to actively participate in different games played in the era" (McMullan 68)

Every part of the play is thus exemplary of the comic and romantic traditions at their highest. Even the sub-plot of the play is woven with the threads of fun and laughter. Malvolio's caricature of his self-love and his self-indulgence, leading to day dreams of high romance, makes him an easy prey of the reckless merrymakers led by Maria. In this play, love and laughter go side by side. The poor steward is not only treated as a lover by a lady, but as a lunatic possessed by an evil spirit. Sir Toby is ready at hand to accept the role of a mad man to settle the old issues; thus comedy and romance are thus blended through and through. The undercurrent of honest Malvolio's tragic suffering and his sad confinement in the dark room are easily forgotten by the audience when they get so much fun out of it in the clown appearing to be 'lunatic' as Sir Topas come to exercise the evil spirit in a delicate and gentle terms. The more reader reads or sees this play, the more he enjoys it. And it is the universality and genuineness of Shakespeare's plays that

whenever a person feels boredom in life due to the monotony, he can see or read this play of Shakespeare and will surely burst into a roar of laughter.

The denouncement scene is again replete with both romance and comedy. Olivia invites Sebastian inside her house from the duel scene, mistaking him for Cesario, and offers to go through the marriage ceremony in a hurry, finding him for once to be so readily agreeable. Sebastian thinks he is in a dream, but he would not lose such a fine opportunity even in a dream, and readily agrees much to the great relief and delight of the love-lorn Olivia. The audience is tickled to laughter at this high-level deception. More and bigger comicality follows, when in the temporary absence of Sebastian, Duke Orsino and Viola appear before poor Olivia and the latter claims Viola as her husband, and brings forth a priest as a witness, but Viola strongly denies it. On seeing all this, the Duke is filled with rage at the disloyalty of his page-boy, and decides to take revenge upon him in frustration and here Viola is in a real tight corner. On the other hand, Antonio hurls abuses at her, thinking him to be Sebastian calling him fickle and faithless. In this situation fun is explicitly mingled with high romance. In this context, Thiselton Dyre remarks, "Shakespeare's observation of the human mind and activities is very sharp and keen, at the same time he observes his surroundings with an eagle's eye" (Dyre 41).

*Twelfth Night* has rightly been called the comedy of comedies, for it combines so many excellences, and combines them so skillfully. The comedy of *Twelfth Night* is both relieved and heightened by an exquisite romance, interwoven with the comic undertones. The play has a happy ending; Olivia weds Sebastian, with whom she has fallen in love at first sight. Viola's disguise is happily removed, and when she appears in her own self, dressed as a maiden, her dazzling beauty and remarkable youth make her fully acceptable to the Duke, who is at the same time fully cured of his sentimentality. In this happy situation, Fabian gives a joyful news that Sir Toby has married Maria and finally Fabian the servant, gives expression to the peace and joy that prevails at the happy ending, despite the Malvolio episode when Fabian says:

"Good madam, hear me speak;

And let no quarrel nor no brawl to come

Taint the condition of this present hour", (Act V Scene I 355-358)

The high and the low are all happy; even Malvolio has no cause to grumble because his release from the Dark Room has freed him from the evil spirit. The bubble of his ambition, to marry his mistress, which was aiming too high above him has been pricked.

Conclusively, *Twelfth Night* unites the entertainment of an intrigue, contrived with ingenuity, to the rich fun of comic characters and situations, and the beautiful colours of an ethereal poetry. In most of his plays, Shakespeare treats love more as an affair of the imagination than the heart. But here we are particularly reminded by him that in his language, the word fancy signified both fancy and love. The love of the music enraptured Duke for Olivia is not merely a fancy, but also an imagination. Viola appears to be first to fall arbitrarily in love with the Duke, whom she serves as a page, although she afterwards touches the tender chords of feeling, the proud Olivia is entangled by the modest messenger of the Duke in whom she is far from suspecting a disguised rival, and at last for a second deception takes the brother for the sister. Thus, there is no doubt that in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare has fused the comedy and the romance in a masterly and superbly manner. In this play, Shakespeare reaches a level of perfection not attained by him in other comedies and he has achieved this harmonious blend of comedy and romance by means of unique parallelism and the whole credit goes to Shakespeare who is fairly regarded as the super human in reference to his genius of creativity.

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