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Course : ENG1D

Date : April 1st (just kidding – its Christmas)

How does the play Twelfth Night develop its themes ?

Twelfth Night develops its theme on two levels. The main plot, written mostly in blank verse, shows the nobility in pursuit of love. The subplot features lower characters, who speak in prose and pursue drunkenness and mischief.

In the main plot, the twins Viola and Sebastian are shipwrecked on the Illyrian coast and separated; each presumes the other dead. Disguised as a young man, Viola joins the court of Duke Orsino, falls in love with him, and becomes his favorite. Orsino loves the lady Olivia, who refuses his attentions because she still mourns her dead brother. When Orsino sends Viola to woo Olivia for him, Olivia falls in love with Viola. Her exclamation “ How quickly may one catch the plague !” (Act 1, Scene 5) is a common theme running through the play ; that love is an illness, and one that strikes quickly to rob people of their senses.

In the subplot, Sir Toby Belch, Olivia’s uncle, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a ridiculous suitor to Olivia, fall out with Malvolio, Olivia’s puritanical steward, who condemns their revels. With the help of Maria and Fabian, Olivia’s servants, they trick the self-serving Malvolio into thinking Olivia loves him, then they confine him for insanity. Sir Toby also persuades Sir Andrew to challenge Viola to a duel. Crucially, Malvolio in a sense tricks himself due to his arrogance, ironically stating that 'imagination does not jade me' (Act 2, Scene 5). It most certainly does though, and the episode again shows a twisted version of Love. Malvolio is in love with the idea of being a Count, not Olivia herself.

These plots untangle when Sebastian appears, marries Olivia, and whips Sir Andrew and Sir Toby. Viola throws off her disguise and accepts Orsino’s proposal of marriage. Freed, Malvolio stomps

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out vowing revenge on them all. Though Viola can finally reveal her 'true' love for the Duke, Olivia still sets to marry Sebastian immediately, suggesting Love is still a

Symbolically opposed to Malvolio is Feste, the wise clown. He fools Olivia out of her mourning and Orsino out of his lovesickness--both self-indulgent, sterile behaviors, like Malvolio's self-love. Feste sees Orsino, and perhaps others like him, as superficial and changeable when he states to the Duke : ' Thy mind is a very opal' (Act 2, Scene 4). Like a jewel reflecting light at different angles and changing it's appearance, so Orsino changes his mind. Ultimately however with a largely happy ending, Shakespeare implies that people should open themselves to celebration and love, even if it makes them appear foolish, since it is truly foolish to deny these life forces.

Notes

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The essay itself perhaps suffers from sentences that are too long. What do you think ?