

‘Twelfth Night’: An Analysis of Quest for Identity

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Abstract

William Shakespeare is a great dramatist and master of mysteries where one can find the elements like cross dressing, twisted plots and mistaken identities where each and every Shakespearean character seems to be struggling for the quest for the identity. The most useful and interesting element among all is ‘Quest for the identity’, and the presence of this element in every comic drama of Shakespeare can be felt in the huge amount. This element gives the audience a platform to raise their interest and curiosity as well to know more and more about the upcoming events and twists and turns in the story. The way which he uses to present the story by using the elements like quest for identity makes him a great thinker who thinks and writes the drama carefully before the presentation on stage. Shakespeare’s famous comedy “Twelfth Night” is the best example of ‘Identity’, where the reader or the audience can see ‘extreme focus on identity’. Each and every human being, who lives in the well-managed society has its own unique identity and every moment human beings run towards it to make his own identity which is always unique and different from others, but the real fact is that no-one can snatch another person’s identity, even one can call it a universal truth that siblings from the same dynasty also have different identities and one cannot resemble them in one instance.

Introduction

'Quest', is a journey towards the goal where the protagonist has to reach after facing the obstacles in his way. In this way, 'Quest for the identity' is a journey to get the identity which must be unique and unforgettable from others. It is a common fact and human nature that a human always runs towards those things which are not in hands and here, 'Identity' plays an important role. Till the achievement of identity human's quest to get this becomes higher and higher and William Shakespeare's comic dramas are also the best example of this. 'The Quest' in the form of 'Identity' plays a central role in Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'. In a Shakespearean way, one can say that the protagonist interpret the incidents as a quest in which he seeks something that he desires more than his life. Like many of Shakespeare's comedies, '*Twelfth Night*', is concerned with the satiation of desire. What is different here is that certain characters are allowed to actualize their fantastic desires and *others* are forbidden by forces within the play. Shakespeare borrowed the device from the Classics and adapting it to his own means. He takes this basic concept even deeper with his comedy of "Twelfth Night" where he makes the twins a boy and a girl and bases the theatrical device on intentional quest for identity. Again, Shakespeare treats these in a slightly different way in the play. In "Twelfth Night" one can see that the other characters only start to get confused close to the end, when Sebastian comes to the scene. But, we cannot say that there are no consequences and confusion before Sebastian's occurrence on the scene. There are, but of a different kind. As mentioned before, quest for the identity is the main device behind the plot of the Shakespearean comedy "Twelfth Night". The play deals with twin characters whose identity is in the quest by one or more of the characters in the play. Shakespeare obviously used the Plautine comedies as a source in his writings of his comedies. In the comedy, the 'quest for identity' also has an influence on the concept of love. Here, Malvolio is the perfect example to see this. He deeply loves his princess and wants to get her at every condition and to achieve this goal he gets ready to make his own identity.

Elliot Krieger, in his work '*The Morality of Indulgence*' points out: "A ruling class ideology operates within the play and prevents Malvolio from creating his own antithetic second world". According to him, Shakespeare's comedies, at first glance, seem to uniformly end on a

positive note, with the fulfillment of desires, the overcoming of obstacles, and the victory over malevolent forces. This is not to say that these comedies are absolutely favorable to strict power structures. *Twelfth Night*, comically incorporates characters of transgression in order to expose entrenched and unjust power structures in their respective societies. Specifically, in its maltreatment of Malvolio in contrast to other characters such as Viola, Maria, Sir Toby, and Feste, demonstrates the function of holiday as a method of allowing individuals to bend social structures just so much while keeping the potential for complete overhaul suppressed motifs of manipulation and falsity. The world which is around them, which they are leaving and those who are set in a lower position is a subject to the power of the elite. *Twelfth Night* is an expression of two key themes through which power and transgression are explored; these themes are 'artifice and ideology'. The plot of the play is founded on the explicit presence of illusion and the pervasion of dominant belief systems which serve to legitimize the power structures found within. Here, one can see the festive spirit of *Twelfth Night* represented by Feste's jokes, songs, and merry-making, has also been signaled by Shakespeare's use of the subtitle, '*What You Will*', and this spirit stands for a freedom from all sorts of restraint. The reader or the audience of Shakespearean drama, one can clearly say that, 'the theme of artifice manifests beautifully in *Twelfth Night* through the atmosphere of holiday which envelops the play and as the title suggests, *Twelfth Night* is a celebration, which includes indulgence, the blurring of rigid lines of propriety and humor. This acts as artifice, ultimately, because there seems the appearance of unimpeded indulgence and the illusion of social mobility, and only humor at the expense of those who do not fit in their places. But, the critics consider '*Twelfth Night*', a disturbing and cynical affair due to underlining subtexts of unfilled homosexual longing and unappeasable conflict for identity. Some critics may take issue with the assertion that "the rules of class are still present" in Illyria during this holiday, and it would seem that they need not look further than Viola for evidence. She seems to be the personification of social mobility and sexual androgyny, transcending explicit lines of defined roles in society. But in fact, her ease of mobility is predicated on her higher social status with which she begins the play. Viola starts out like Orsino, able to use her environment and the people therein for her own ends. She says to the Captain, "I'll serve this Duke; Thou shalt present me as a eunuch to him". In these lines, "she denies, in a subtle way, the captain's autonomy, the possibility of an opposition of wills, the

possibility that the captain may be unwilling or unable to help her” .Thus, her social mobility is a direct privilege of her membership in a superior class. In fact, as Viola spends more time as Cesario, trapped in the subservient role of servant for the Duke Orsino, her own language reflects her social descent. She moves from imperatives in Act I, to “apostrophes she can utter only in soliloquy by Act II” (“Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness/Wherein the pregnant enemy does much/ . . . / O time, thou must untangle this, not I,/It is too hard a knot for me t’untie”, and finally to prayer addressed in an aside in Act III (“Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them/how much I lack of a man”). Fortunately for Viola, however, once her social status is revealed at the end of the play, Orsino sees her as a social equal, declaring her to be her “master’s mistress”. After spending the entire play in playing the role of the servant, Viola is instantaneously restored to her aristocratic position and is immediately granted the respect intrinsic with this status. This is not the case for another character in the play who wishes to cross social boundaries; Malvolio’s aspirations to change his social status are interrupted by forces within the play because of his direction. Viola wanted to move down, but Malvolio wanted to move up, “To be Count Malvolio”. By nature of his desire to ascend, however, Malvolio has internalized the system which keeps him socially paralyzed. Thus, he wishes to be Count so that he may have power to control Sir Toby’s drinking and Feste’s rude mouth, both of which he reprimands at different points in the play. This is a reflection that while although in deeds Malvolio acts as a loyal steward and fulfills his duties to Olivia, in his words he aspires to be greater in comparison to those around him. Knowing this, and in the spirit of holiday, Maria proposes to play a joke on Malvolio with Sir Toby, Fabian, and Feste. So she gives form to Malvolio’s fantasy, though still independent of social reality; her letter is artifice. Since it is this false letter which Malvolio bases his social ascent on, his mobility can be nothing but illusory. Ironically, one can say that it is made possible by the atmosphere of holiday, despite it ending up with him in darkness. Holiday does not mean the same thing for all social classes, then.

The social mobility of the bourgeoisie into aristocracy can be seen, it was possible also due to the incapability, ignorance, and empty, boastful sense of pedigree among the existing elites. Although he belongs to the servant class, he believes strongly that he is better than the individuals that he serves. Malvolio often takes it upon himself to try to discipline others when

Olivia is not around. This is evident in the play's treatment of Malvolio's desire for wish-fulfillment, for indulgence in an inflated sense of self. Although Malvolio already appears to enjoy a place as a trusted steward within Olivia's household, he desires more, perhaps, some may argue, even excess – just like the rest of the characters participating in this holiday. However, “the excessive behavior that is moral when enacted by Orsino, Olivia, and Sir Toby is ‘perverted’ when enacted by Malvolio”. Some argues that Malvolio's desire for indulgence is immoral, and therefore punished, because of his narcissism, but Malvolio in fact shares the same narcissistic fantasy as Orsino, who of course is not punished. “Ultimately, there is no fundamental difference between Malvolio's fantasy of narcissistic withdrawal into a world in which he can be Count Malvolio and Orsino's narcissistic withdrawal into the Petrarchan conventions and the beds of flowers”. The presence of holiday creates the false sense that anyone can participate in the inherent indulgence, but because the rules of class are still present this is nothing but artifice. In fact, the Christian sense of community itself can be seen as artifice, if one remembers the attitude expressed by Sir Toby upon his entrance and observes Maria's efforts to maintain an “illusion of decorum”. The elements of conflict for the identity, mainly ideological, between Malvolio and, the rest of the characters are evident from his first entry to throughout the play can be seen clearly. For instance, one can see that -After spending the entire play in playing the role of the servant, Viola is instantaneously restored to her aristocratic position and is immediately granted the respect intrinsic with this status. This is not the case for another character in the play who wishes to cross social boundaries; Malvolio's aspirations to change his social status are interrupted by forces within the play because of his direction. Viola wanted to move down, but Malvolio wanted to move up, “To be Count Malvolio”. By nature of his desire to ascend, however, Malvolio has internalized the system which keeps him socially paralyzed. Thus, he wishes to be Count so that he may have power to control Sir Toby's drinking and Feste's rude mouth, both of which he reprimands at different points in the play. This is a reflection that while although in deeds Malvolio acts as a loyal steward and fulfills his duties to Olivia, in his words he aspires to be greater in comparison to those around him. Knowing this, and in the spirit of holiday, Maria proposes to play a joke on Malvolio with Sir Toby, Fabian, and Feste. So she gives form to Malvolio's fantasy, though still independent of social reality; her letter is artifice. Since it is this false letter which Malvolio bases his social ascent on, his mobility

can be nothing but illusory him in darkness. Now, Malvolio senses that the others are ridiculing him, and getting annoyed he almost stoops to their 'element' by telling them to 'go, hang yourselves all.' The jest now goes one step further out of proportion when the conspirators decide they will imprison Malvolio. This added evident confusion causes the audience to feel sympathetic towards Malvolio. He seems as a bigheaded character, which means that he considers other people to be of a lower standard than himself. "Some are born great, some have greatness and some greatness thrust upon." Here, Malvolio believes very proudly that, he is a great man and that he would have 'greatness thrust upon him'. It is, therefore, not difficult to imagine why the decadent aristocrats like Sir Toby Belch or Sir Andrew Aguecheek are so inimical to Malvolio. The character of Malvolio adds the depth and complexities in the play.

Conclusion

After much discussion on the topic, the conclusion is that, - William Shakespeare's comedy "Twelfth Night" explores the themes of identity beautifully and quest for identity plays an important role which is quite impossible for other dramatists to present in a different and the way which the reader or the audience can understand properly. One can proudly say that, 'The Bard's works are rare but not unknown in our kingdom, and these are completely unforgettable'. The style which William Shakespeare adopted that time is unique, unforgettable and now the dramatist of new age tries to adopt his style but they don't get much success during the writing of their plays or during the performances on stage. My own opinion is that the element 'Quest for Identity' is successful in making the readers or the audiences curious and William Shakespeare is successful in his work and in this context, the present paper gets success which successfully tries to explore the focus on the quest for identity in 'Twelfth Night' and, to highlight how Shakespeare's vision in *Twelfth Night* geared throughout towards the formal need of identity for every person enough to be satisfying, yet still sensitive to the society and for the environment which his fable creates. During the entire play, one meets with an interesting way of seeing Twelfth Night and successfully examines how it deals with the subversive energy and contesting concepts of authority in characters like Malvolio. There is no doubt that William Shakespeare is known for his brilliant playwriting skills and "Twelfth Night" is no exception. Shakespearean comedy 'Twelfth Night' completely fulfills the reader's expectations from a play whether they

reads it or whether they watches it on the stage where everybody can be seen as a struggler for
the identity.

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