

## **Melancholy Jacques: Shakespeare's Happiest Conception**

**Sheryll**

**B.A. (Hons) English,**

**University Of Delhi**

### **Abstract**

Jacques is easily the most impressive character so far as audience is concerned but least needed so far as the plot of the play is concerned. He is considered as a side character according to most of the critics for the play "As You Like It" by William Shakespeare. Although he is side lined in the play but Shakespeare made it a point that whatever small part he gets, it impacts the whole play. Most of the important instances or dialogues in the play are delivered by Jacques. Be it mocking Orlando or his famous poem "Seven Ages of Man" in which describes the whole human life, Jacques was the best at what all he did. He is a commentator among the actors, thinker among the doers and a melancholy person among the lively ones. His character is a total sum of all these reactions and impressions. He is called a weeping philosopher; weeping over the sorry scheme of things.

**Keywords:** mocking, commentator, weeping philosopher, egoistic.

## Introduction

“ I have neither the scholar’s melancholy which is emulation; nor the musician’s which is fantastical; nor the courtier’s which is proud ; nor the lover’s which is all these; but it is a melancholy of my own. ”

Jacques is easily the most impressive character so far as audience is concerned but least needed so far as the plot of the play is concerned. The play can very well do without it but audience certainly cannot. Shakespeare also seems to be Jacques’ party as he has put the most significant passages of the play in his mouth. It is he, who claims to be the speaker of some most important speeches ‘Seven Ages of Man’ being one of them. He is a commentator among the actors, thinker among the doers and a melancholy person among the lively ones. The rare significance of his character can be well assessed from the fact that he has nothing to do with the plot of the play yet is indispensable for it. He can be called an observer of the drama in which all other characters are traditional and romantic. He does not value whatever is most important to them but for him all other characters return to the life of the court.

He is called a weeping philosopher; weeping over the sorry scheme of things. His melancholy has certain fruitful ambiguity about it. It is the result of his frustration, like French poet Baudelaire, he seems not having the life he deserves. There seems to be a great gap between his aspirations and achievements and this gap has made him such. Life must have treated him in a step motherly manner. His character is a total sum of all these reactions and impressions. He is one of those who become passive after having seen and known much of this life which the happy ones call a pleasure. But to Jacques, to use a line by Shelly, “This cup has been dealt with another measure.”

He stands all alone in the galaxy of all other characters in the play. He has nothing to do with them and they in return nothing to do with him. Their so called love affairs and achievements are laughed at by him. He is a great mocker in the play. His mocking attitude is amply manifested in his famous speech” Seven Ages of Man”. Herein he makes a mockery of each stage and the very language used by him is of mocking and satirical nature. Man has been reduced to a clown and the life he leads is but a shame.

He seems to take vengeance on life. We gather that he does nothing in the play. His role is only to observe and express. In the scheme of the plot of the play, he has been allotted no

more yet he becomes the most significant character among other characters. The most distinctive note of his character is his purely reflective attitude. No other character in the play is as contemplative as Jacques is. If we take away his character from the play, the plot does not suffer. But his presence in the play is very important because it adds a tone to the atmosphere of the play. He is, as Duke also admits, “Full of Matter”. His contemplative moods are the real sources of interest in his character. It is in these moods we find the best and the real Jacques.

Jacques is egoist. He is a person who thinks himself to be superior to everyone else. His very presence leaves an aura of superiority in the play. When he comments, as he always ‘comments ‘ and never ‘speaks’ , the very idiom he uses springs from his self-styled superiority complex. For example, the comments made by him on Touchstone in the presence of his self-mock bride Audrey, are characteristic of this note of egotism in character of Jacques:

“O knowledge, ill inhabited!

Worse than Jove in a thatched house!”

“A material fools”

His conversation with Orlando also seconds it:

“I was seeking for a fool when I found you ‘

His dialogue with Rosalind ‘It is good to be sad and say nothing’ also springs from his egotism.

Jacques is very much convinced that this world is no place for living. It is only the fools who can relish it. That is why the so called glittering and glorious values of life do not matter for him at all. This constant sense of frustration is the cause of his morbid and melancholy nature and Cynicism has become the second nature.

He says:

‘O! That I were a fool

I am ambitious for a motley coat’

And why is he desirous of becoming a fool:

‘I must have liberty

To blow on when I please for so fools have’

In other words, Jacques sometimes poses himself to be a reformer of this world. In his estimate, mankind has grown to be foolish and senseless and he wants to take up the role of scourge.

There must be a method with the following statement made by him:

‘I can suck melancholy out of a dog as a weasel sucks eggs.’”

It is the statement which epitomizes the essence of his personality and his melancholy, like the malignity of Iago in Othello, is not a motiveless. It is not a pastime or a support with him. He seems to have adopted this attitude and followed this track not without a ‘cause’. His withdrawal from the drama of life must have some reason and what is this reason we can know only by guess work. What is it which has made all men and women imposters in his eyes? To probe into this decision and to reach some final conclusion about it is neither desirable nor possible. He is an enigma and has rich experience on his back. That is why he is the only character in the play who talks in proverbial wisdom who can deny the truth in his famous speech:

‘Blow! Blow! Thou winter wind

Thou art not, so unkind as man’s sting’

It is absurd to analyze and understand character of Jacques by using traditional yardsticks of criticism as he is not one who is either praised or despised. On the contrary, he is one who makes his present felt and noticed. And it is enough to make him one of the most significant and discussed characters in the whole arena of Shakespeare’s characterization.

What a character Shakespeare has portrayed!

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