

المحاضرة الحادية عشر Main Themes and Characters:

Love as a Cause of Suffering

Twelfth Night is a romantic comedy, and romantic love is the play's main focus. Despite the fact that the play offers a happy ending, in which the various lovers find one another and achieve wedded bliss, Shakespeare shows that love can cause pain.

Many of the characters seem to view love as a kind of curse, a feeling that attacks its victims suddenly and disruptively.

Various characters claim to suffer painfully from being in love, or, rather, from the pangs of unrequited love. At one point,

Orsino depicts love dolefully as an "appetite" that he wants to satisfy and cannot (I.i.); at another point, he calls his desires "fell and cruel hounds" (I.i). Olivia more bluntly describes love as a "plague" from which she suffers terribly (I.v.). These metaphors contain an element of violence, further painting the

love-struck as victims of some random force in the universe. Even the less melodramatic Viola sighs unhappily that "My state is desperate for my master's love" (II.ii). This desperation has the potential to result in violence—as in Act V, scene i,

when Orsino threatens to kill Cesario because he thinks that - Cesario has forsaken him to become Olivia's lover.

Love is also exclusionary: some people achieve romantic happiness, while others do not. At the end of the play, as the happy lovers rejoice, both Malvolio and Antonio are prevented from having the objects of their desire. Malvolio, who has pursued Olivia, must ultimately face the realization that he is a fool, socially unworthy of his noble mistress. Antonio is in a more difficult situation, as social norms do not allow for the gratification of his apparently sexual attraction to Sebastian.

Love, thus, cannot conquer all obstacles, and those whose desires go unfulfilled remain no less in love but feel the sting of its absence all the more severely.

The Uncertainty of Gender

Gender is one of the most obvious and much-discussed topics in the play. *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare's so-called transvestite comedies, in which a female character—in this case, Viola—disguises herself as a man. This situation creates a sexual mess: Viola falls in love with Orsino but cannot tell him, because he thinks she is a man, while Olivia, the object of Orsino's affection, falls for Viola in her guise as Cesario. There is a clear homoerotic subtext here: Olivia is in love with a woman, even if she thinks he is a man, and Orsino often remarks on Cesario's beauty, suggesting that he is attracted to Viola even before her male disguise is removed. This latent homoeroticism finds an explicit echo in the minor character of Antonio, who is clearly in love with his male friend, Sebastian. But Antonio's desires cannot be satisfied, while Orsino and Olivia both find tidy heterosexual gratification once the sexual ambiguities and deceptions are straightened out.

Yet, even at the play's close, Shakespeare leaves things somewhat murky, especially in the Orsino-Viola relationship. Orsino's declaration of love to Viola suggests that he enjoys prolonging the pretense of Viola's masculinity. Even after he knows that Viola is a woman, Orsino says to her, "Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never should'st love woman like to me". Similarly, in his last lines, Orsino declares, "Cesario, come— / For so you shall be while you are a man; /

But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen". Even once everything is revealed, Orsino continues to address Viola by her male name. We can thus only wonder whether Orsino is truly in love with Viola, or if he is more enamoured of her male persona.