

How far do you agree
that nothing is as it
seems in twelfth night



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“ Nothing that is so is so. ” To what extent do you agree with this in relation to Shakespeare’s play “ Twelfth Night”? In Shakespeare’s comedy ‘ Twelfth Night’, the main theme of disguise and facade is used to create comedy as the characters ‘ conceal’ themselves. This adds to the confusion and consequently the characters, and at times the audience, are doubtful of what is real.

Shakespeare makes it clear that ‘ Twelfth Night’ is up for interpretation through the use of his double title ‘ what you will’; he introduces the theme of ambiguity and therefore foreshadows the main concerns of the play and the idea that appearances do not always convey reality. Steven Holden describes the play as “ A comic mediation on desire, disguise and inherent bisexuality “ as in the present day, comedies are often thought of as being cheerful and light hearted.

However in the Shakespearian era, comedies simply had resolution of conflict often being happy endings, even when the climax of the plays were dark and contained serious issues, a potential reading of the culmination of ‘ Twelfth Night’. In the Shakespearian era, Twelfth Night was a festival where traditional roles were often relaxed, masters would wait on servants, men would dress as women, and inversion of the hierarchy took place in many ways.

This convention of comedy is used throughout “ Twelfth Night” in order to create humour for an audience of this time, as the facade of the individual characters and their feelings, leads to the confusion and chaos which, makes this play so humorous. The element of disguise in the play conforms to the idea that “ nothing that is so, is so” and by using sibilance and repetition, <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-do-you-agree-that-nothing-is-as-it-seems-in-twelfth-night/>

Shakespeare makes Feste's quote paramount. He uses the character of Feste to represent what the audience are thinking, and presents the idea that what you may see on the surface isn't necessarily what is true.

The way in which Shakespeare has the characters "conceal" themselves both mentally and physically, raises questions about what makes us who we are, thus supporting the idea that "nothing that is so is so". Feste puts on the disguise even though Malvolio won't be able to see him since the room is dark, suggesting that the importance of clothing is not just in the eye of the beholder. This implicitly questions whether things such as gender and class are absolute, or if they too are open to negotiation.

Shakespeare uses the character of Viola/Cesario to exemplify this theory, as Orsino judges her to be a man even though she never actually states that she is. "And all is semblative a woman's part". The fact that Orsino recognises her femininity could suggest that the characters are only aware of what the eye can see, as Shakespeare chooses not to have them question each other's true existence. Although it is presented that the characters are deeply in love, later on in the play we discover that this is not the case; as one by one the characters fall in love with identities that are not real.

The metaphor spoken by Olivia "but we draw the curtain and show you the picture" suggests that she is a representation of what is real, rather than the person who the characters see. The idea that Olivia has had a curtain covering up who she really is implies that Orsino may be falling in love with a projection of who he wants Olivia to be, rather than who she is. Many of the characters in the play are presented as projections rather than actual

characters, Viola masquerades as a man ' Cesario' who is paradoxically a fiction within the already false play.

However Olivia still falls in love with ' him' which conforms to the idea that the characters love may not be a ' fixed term' and questions whether any form of love in the play even exists as " nothing that is so is so". This idea, that even the characters know that nothing is as it seems, is emphasised when even Fabian sees the unlikelihood of Malvolio's situation as their almost evil plot coincidentally goes to plan. " If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it improbable fiction".

The word ' fiction' reminds the audience of the constructed nature of the play, therefore emphasising the sense of escapism that the audience may feel when watching the events on stage creating a thin line between what the characters are actually doing and feeling, and what is just pretence. The dramatic irony of this quote is used to create humour of this almost tragic scene, as the audience laugh at Malvolio's expense, W. H Auden states that " Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare's unpleasant plays", which could be due to this very scene.

Shakespeare puts the characters into these inescapable situations where even the characters themselves are questioning their own sanity. The structure of the play conforms to the common conventions of comedy however rather than having a clear resolution; the status quo is restored, yet different from prior to the plays action, similar to one of Shakespeare's other plays " measure to measure". The audience are lead to believe that Orsino's love for Olivia is ' passionate' and unbreakable; however this is subdued as it becomes apparent that he is also in love with Viola or arguably, Cesario.

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This supports the theory that in 'Twelfth Night' "nothing that is so is so" Shakespeare doesn't allow the characters to understand the truth properly until the very last scene; the use of dramatic irony ensures that the audience always know the real character from their disguise. Viola demands the captain to "Conceal me what I am" and therefore the audience are constantly aware of what is going on and from this perspective; the audience see the characters for whom they really are however, the confusion and chaos does not allow the characters to be aware of what is real and what is not.

The majority of Twelfth Night concentrates on the facade and pretence that each character portrays however there is one aspect that seems to remain sincere throughout the play. One could argue that the brotherly love between Sebastian and Viola is as close to a depiction of real love as one could expect on stage and that it is not questionable as it exemplifies the traditional views of love of the time. Shakespeare contrasts the love between Sebastian and Viola with the passive love Olivia shares for her dead brother.

However at the end of the play, her brother is forgotten in the joy of re-establishing the order of the play. In contrast to this, Shakespeare presents Viola's love to be like that of a parent's love for their child, as she takes responsibility and chooses to be resourceful, unlike Olivia. Viola takes a slightly more positive approach "perchance he is not drowned". This optimistic language suggests that Viola's love for her brother is extremely strong as she chooses not to think negatively, thus keeping the love for her brother alive. Shakespeare uses these two characters to represent hope for the play.

Whilst the rest of the characters show falseness in feelings, love and friendship, the love between these two inseparable siblings is always genuine and a 'fixed force'. In fact one could suggest that the resolution of the play comes solely from the reuniting of the twins rather than the marriage of the other characters, as we know that the happiness these two characters share is sincere. To some extent, one could say that Feste is the voice of Shakespeare in the play, allowing the character to be constantly reminded of reality; he says "Cucullus non facit monachum" which means you can't judge a book by its cover.

This quote should be considered when thinking about any of the characters within the play as it illustrates how Shakespeare wants the characters to be interpreted. Although there are several depictions of reality played upon stage, and arguably showing realism as best as possible, the majority of "Twelfth Night" exemplifies the theme of disguise, and one has to question whether the ending is in fact happy, as some of the characters fall in love with the other characters who may not be who they think they are.