

The function of plot divisions in twelfth night and in doctor faustus



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In both plays, *Twelfth Night* and *Doctor Faustus*, there exists a high and a low (or comic) plot. This plot division serves as a parallel – the actions and characters in the low plot coincide with the actions and characters in the high plot. The presence of the mirroring primary and secondary plots in the plays serves to advance the theme of the stories. In *Twelfth Night* the primary, or “high” plot is the action between Olivia, Viola/ “Cesario”, Orsino, and eventually Sebastian and Antonio. The audience is reminded that the theme of the play is “mistaken identity”. We see it first in the high plot as Viola disguises herself as a man in order to become Orsino’s young page, “Cesario”. Feste, the clown in Olivia’s court allows for some comic relief, but also ironically mirrors the primary plot’s theme of disguised identity in act I, scene V, when Olivia orders him to be taken away after being unexplainably gone for a while. The clown quotes a Latin proverb, “The hood doesn’t make the monk,” that is, “Clothes don’t make the man.” In Act two of *Twelfth Night*, mistaken identity (that of Viola/Cesario) is mirrored in the secondary plot when Malvolio is the butt of a practical joke orchestrated by Maria. His being fooled by the members of Olivia’s house into thinking that Olivia is in love with him, again, parallels the love triangle between Olivia, Orsino, and Cesario that is our primary focus. Malvolio follows “Olivia’s” orders in the letter to wear yellow stockings and to “go cross-gartered” and to smile constantly, and he is fooled into believing that Olivia may actually have romantic feelings toward him. The joke raises the familiar themes of confusing fluidity of identity, the illusions and delusions of love, and the importance of clothing establishing one’s identity and position. Toby and the others laugh at Malvolio’s fantasy that Olivia could possibly have any real feelings toward him because he is not of “noble” blood. This, we will

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remember, is of great importance if love is to be possible, for Olivia first becomes interested in “ Cesario” in act I. v after discovering that he/she is a gentleman. Malvolio’s fantasy involves changing his clothing: he imagines himself “ in my branched velvet gown” (II. v. 47-48), which was the clothing of a wealthy nobleman, not that of a steward. The letter from Olivia also asks him to alter his clothing, wearing yellow stockings and crossed garters and to change his personality. Thus we see the direct parallels with the central plot where Viola’s disguises herself in men’s clothes. By Act III, the cases of mistaken identity and deception get more complicated. The first case is found in Malvolio’s supposed madness because he thinks he shares a secret understanding with Olivia, even though the strange things he does and says bewilder her. Another misunderstanding occurs in the primary plot as Cesario/Viola’s brother Sebastian and his friend Antonio arrive in Illyria and Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are left very confused as “ Cesario” is called “ Sebastian” when Antonio is carried off by the police. Antonio, in turn, is believed to be insane, mirroring Malvolio’s being locked away in a little dark room for being mistakenly thought to be insane. Themes of madness and illusion are addressed in both the primary and secondary plots of Twelfth Night. The practical joke on Malvolio continues with Feste visiting him in the dark prison pretending to be a priest. Feste, the “ priest”, pretends that the room is not actually dark, but is full of windows and light, and that thus Malvolio must be insane if he cannot see the light. Elsewhere, in the high plot, Sebastian is very confused, but delighted, by this adoring woman, Olivia, who is apparently in love with him. At one point, Sebastian asks, “ are all the people mad”.. “ Or am I mad...?” In the final Act, the primary and secondary plots follow one another sequentially as they have throughout the <https://assignbuster.com/the-function-of-plot-divisions-in-twelfth-night-and-in-doctor-faustus/>

former acts of the play. The concepts of misunderstanding, mistaken identity, and insanity are all resolved. In Doctor Faustus, the function of a plot division works in much the same way as it does in Twelfth Night, that is the plot divisions parallel one another for the purpose of carrying along important themes of the play. Not only does Marlow use the plot division for advancing themes, but more importantly to remind and inform the audience of things that are noteworthy. Differently, though, the important antireligious theme in Dr. Faustus is advanced without a distinct parallel between the high and low plot. This conflict with religion can be seen in the high plot when Faustus, Cornelius and Valdes appear as an " unholy trinity," or after Faustus signs the deed and says, " Consummatum est," or " It is finished" - words of blasphemy as they were Christ's final words on the cross. Another advance of the anti-religious theme exists as Faustus wavers between the good and bad angels. There are no clear-cut parallels between these instances of such an important theme. True, there are similarities, but there is not such an obvious resistance to God found in the low plot as there is in the high plot. If this were more like Twelfth Night, the clown would have lingered in indecision, mirroring Faustus' situation with his good and bad angels, or Wagner would have said something in denial and rejection of God. This is how the two plays differ - Twelfth Night's major themes found in the high plot always seem to be paralleled directly with the theme in the low plot. Other themes in Dr. Faustus follow a more distinct route of parallelism. In scene III, for example, Faustus conjures Mephistophilis, whom Faustus informs that he would be willing to sell his soul to Satan in exchange for Mephistophilis' services for the next twenty-seven years. As in

Shakespeare's play, the secondary plot parallels the high plot, in this case, <https://assignbuster.com/the-function-of-plot-divisions-in-twelfth-night-and-in-doctor-faustus/>

as Faustus' servant, Wagner, convinces the clown to agree to serve him for seven years in scene IV. The clown's decision to sell his soul to the Devil for a shoulder of mutton makes the parallel between scene III and IV even clearer. The clown's response is that he would have to have the mutton "well roasted and a good sauce to it (IV. 12)" if he were to "pay so dear." The suggestion that his soul is a very dear price to pay serves as a reminder to the audience that Faustus has just agreed to sell his soul to Lucifer. Another important connection between the high and low plots happens when Robin the Ostler find one of Faustus' "conjuring books," and he and Ralph decide to try it out. Scenes VIII and IX illustrate the negative consequences of using magic as Mephistophilis turned Robin and Ralph into apes as punishment for trying to use Faustus' book to conjure without having made any kind of "deal" to entitle them to do so. Faustus' deal with the Devil is alluded in the low plot when Ralph asks Robin what book he has and he responds, "What book! Why, the most intolerable book for conjuring that e'er was invented by any brimstone devil (VIII. 19-20). This might suggest that Robin is onto the deal Faustus has made with the devil, but more importantly, it just serves a reminder to the audience that the book actually was invented by a devil, thereby adding a bit of dramatic irony. Ralph makes another allusion to Faustus' situation when Robin tempts him with the kitchen maid, Nan Spit: "On that condition I'll feed thy devil with horsebread long as he lives, of free cost (VIII. 30-31)." Here Ralph seems to offer a smaller version of the exchange Faustus has made. In conclusion, in Twelfth Night and Doctor Faustus themes are moved along by the existence of parallels between the primary and secondary plots. While this occurs more prevalently in

Shakespeare's play, Marlow more strongly relies on the actions in his <https://assignbuster.com/the-function-of-plot-divisions-in-twelfth-night-and-in-doctor-faustus/>

high/primary plot to carry along the most important theme of the play, and uses parallels between the high and low plots simply to clarify and remind the audience of smaller themes.