

M.A. Semester-I, MJC-1

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Women characters in "Twelfth Night"

Q.: Write a note on the contrast of women characters in Twelfth Night.

Ans.: Both possess extra-ordinary beauty: Both Viola and Olivia are women of extraordinary beauty. Even though Viola is disguised as a man, the Duke is greatly struck by her personal charm. He admires her beauty, comparing her to Diana. As for Olivia, the Duke says that, when he first saw her, it seemed to him that the air had been purged of all impurities. Later on, seeing her in eyes says that "heaven walks on earth".

Both have lost their respective brothers: Both these women have lost their respective brothers, though Viola's loss proves to be temporary, Olivia is in mourning for her dead brother whom she loved very much. Viola is much grieved to think that her brother has been drowned in the shipwreck. Hearing of Olivia's mourning, Viola expresses a desire to take employment in Olivia's household, because she perceive a kind of bond between Olivia and herself (because of the death of Olivia's brother and the supposed death of her own brother).

Both are very witty: Both Viola and Olivia possess a sparkling wit. This wit is seen in the course of their very first interview. There is an exchange of witty remarks between them, and neither of them feels at a loss for a retort. When Viola expresses a desire to see Olivia's face, Olivia asks her whether she has been deputed by the Duke "to negotiate" with her face. When Olivia asks this handsome messenger of the Duke to state her business, Viola says wittily: "I bring no overture of war, no taxation of homage: I hold the olive in my hand.

Both are romantic: Both these women have romantic natures, and both of them fall in love at first sight. Viola falls in love with the Duke as soon as she sees him, and she immediately makes up her mind to marry him. Olivia falls in love with Cesario (or Viola) at first sight and tries her utmost to win Cesario's heart.

Olivia's grief and Viola's hope: But Viola and Olivia also offer an interesting study in contrast. Olivia's sadness over her brother's death is highly exaggerated by her. She has decided to live a life of aloofness from all men for a period of seven years. This is a foolish vow for her to take. The Clown proves her to be foolish in this respect when he points out that she is mourning for the soul of her dead brother being in heaven. And, indeed, there is something artificial about the mourning. As soon as she meets Cesario, she is fascinated by his good looks and sweet nature, and forgets her grief about her brother. Viola, on the other hand, behaves like a normal human being in this respect. She expresses her feelings in the following words:

And what should I do in Illyria? My brother he is in Elysium

Perchance he is not drowned.

This means that she still has hope, and this hope is further strengthened by the sea captain's description of how her brother was seen afloat on the sea.