

Teacher- Aditi Jana

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As You Like It as a romantic comedy

A Shakespearean romantic comedy is a venturesome and imaginative undertaking. H.B. Charlton points out how the Shakespearean comedies inspire us to be happy with them. They do not merely cajole us into laughing at them. Charlton says, "Shakespearean comedy is not finally satiric, it is poetic. It is not conservative, it is creative. The way of it is that of the imagination rather than that of pure reason. It is an artist's vision, not a critic's exposition." It is ever irradiated with the glory and sunshine of poetry and cheerfulness. Plot and character are a mingling of realism and fantasy. Shakespeare's fancy, half emotional and half- intellectual sheds its own light on character and scene. The settings and incidents in "Twelfth Night" and "As You Like It" are all imaginary, and yet not quite divorced from life. The characters we meet in Illyria or Forest of Arden would be quite at home in England.

The majority of the characters are true to life. Thus Frederick and Adam in "As You Like It" are respectively the typical brother and servant of the Elizabethan Age which had not yet freed itself completely from the shackles of feudalism. On the other hand, the hero and the heroine . Orlando and Rosalind have strong romantic colouring. The incidents are possible in the world we live in and the characters are not proof against the onslaughts of winter and rough weather, sorrows and sufferings, despair and disappointment, Charlton says very aptly, "But though the ultimate world of Shakespearean comedy is romantic, imaginative, and poetic, it is by no means insubstantial and fantastic. The Forest of Arden is not conventional Arcadia. Its inhabitants are not exempt from the penalty of Adam. Winter and rough weather, season's differences, the icy fang and churlish chiding of the winter's wind invade Arden as often as they invade the hemisphere of ours." Thus Shakespearean romantic comedy presents a happy fusion of romance and realism. It is both removed from and related to life. The setting pulls it away from life but characters and incidents draw it very close to it. This is how Shakespeare produces "that willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith."

It is the glory and credit of Shakespeare's comic art that it has bridged the gulf between romance and realism. It is his humour which has helped him perform this impossible task. This humour irradiates both the character and setting., Prof. A. Nicoll says, "A romantic comedy is a compromise between romance and comedy. In this climate of romance, the solemnity of love is relieved by the generosity of laughter. This prevailing note is one of "jest and youthful jollity." The spirit is always "joyous , refined and romantic" says Prof. Dowden.

Love leading to marriage is the theme. Often more than one pair is ultimately joined in wedlock. Rosalind and Orlando are stirred up to their deepest depths by love at first sight. The text illustrates this through Phebe's words, "Whoever loved , that loved not at first sight?" It is the love of Celia and Oliver and of Phebe herself for Ganymede. Love alone of all human passions , has found an entrance into the world of "As You Like It" which is no less than a love poem. It is happy love , full of imagination, of glad rapture, its impulsiveness, its generosity and its pathos. In asking Orlando to woo her in masquerade, Rosalind hints upon the novel method of love-making. This shows how in a romantic comedy it is the woman who always takes the initiative over men. This wooing is a great experience for both the lovers. The intense sincerity of both is concealed under the superficial levity of make-belief. But the play never idealizes love or life. Rosalind herself is ironical in her exposure of the follies of sentimental passion. Touchstone's witty criticism and love for Arcady bring out the realistic side of love. Love is a spiritual force which uplifts, elevates and ennobles all.

Disguises are an important aspect of a romantic comedy in their emphasis on the romantic element in them. Thus Rosalind and Celia take the disguises of Ganymede and Aliena.

Frequent use of songs is another feature of a romantic comedy. In "As You Like It" , they throw into relief the idea that runs through the speeches of the Duke and the lords. They intensify the romantic background and add to the holiday mood so typical of these comedies. Later in the play when the spirit of courtship is in the air, the song sung by the two pages echoes again the happy spring -like feeling.