The Relevance of Twelfth Night for Adolescents

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The Relevance of *Twelfth Night* for Adolescents

For years, *Romeo and Juliet* has been the standard choice for English teachers of adolescents. However, there are different problems that can potentially arise from teaching this play. For example, the only type of romance explored in the text is forbidden young love that ends in suicide. This should not be the type of romance that young students can relate to as it is not a healthy model to follow. In a report in the Digital Journal Mullins said, “There are times when young lovers who face problems from the outside turn to suicide. They may think being like Romeo and Juliet is poetic. It never is. Kids forget, the story never had a happy ending…Teenagers are more impulsive than adults. They feel their pain will never escape and a few decide that they can't survive it.” While most teenagers are emotionally healthy, it is best to avoid anything in the classroom that would play a part in an impulsive teenager’s decision to commit suicide. *Romeo and Juliet* could have that effect.

One of the reasons why *Romeo and Juliet* is an appealing play for teachers of middle school age students is because of the age of the protagonists. It is not the only play with
teenagers, however. *Twelfth Night*’s protagonists are young too, although the play has been called “the very antithesis of *Romeo and Juliet*” because of the important differences in the types of romance these adolescents are a part of (Draper 249). *Twelfth Night* is a valuable play to be studied by junior high students as an introduction to Shakespeare. It includes humor, it deals with the important issues of relationships and bullying in a healthy way, and it encourages the reader to move away from a suspension of reality with these and other issues that are important in this stage of life. Shakespeare needs to be relatable to students in order to break down the barriers of difficult language and a bygone time period that make his work appear impenetrable to young people today.

One way in which young students can find relevance in *Twelfth Night* to their lives is through the different relationships boys and girls have with the people they are attracted to. As one teacher who uses *Twelfth Night* in his class said, “One of the more amusing things about teaching adolescents is that they are constantly dealing with love problems” (Boysen). He explained that this can be taken advantage of when teaching *Twelfth Night* to help the students become interested in Shakespeare. *Twelfth Night* has a greater variety of romantic situations and none of them end in suicide, as far as we know. Also, none of them are particularly passionate. While it is unlikely that students would mistake each other’s genders, the general experiences and feelings experienced by these characters are timeless and relatable to students in junior high.

These varied relationships the characters experience are present in middle school. Duke Orsino, who has experienced love at first sight for Olivia, says, “O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first, Methought she purged the air of pestilence! That instant was I turn'd into a hart; And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, E'er since pursue me” (1.1.20). Many a middle school student has felt that way. Unfortunately, Olivia opposes his affection. His exclamations of love
are cliché and repel her. She says she’s heard it all before. Viola loves Duke Orsino, who is oblivious to her romantic feelings. Malvolio and Sir Andrew think Olivia might like them when she does not and never will. Sir Andrew starts to realize this when he sees Olivia with Cesario and says to Sir Toby, “I saw your niece do more favours to the counts serving-man than ever she bestowed upon me” (3.2.1413). He is willing to go to great lengths to impress her, including threatening to fight Cesario, even though he is a coward. Duke Orsino spends some time believing that the girl he likes has been stolen from him by a friend whom he thought he could trust. The different relationship situations in this play are many and varied. Junior high is full of situations like these and even those students who do not have any romantic connections or problems are fascinated by them. There is a fear of Shakespeare in young students that comes from expecting to not understand his language or gain anything from someone who lived so long ago, but this fear can be overcome through the relevance of the play. *Twelfth Night* is a good introduction to Shakespeare as an artist whose themes transcend time and place and age.

Bullying is another very applicable issue to students in junior high that appears in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. According to the U. S. National Institute of Health, about 47 teens are bullied every 5 minutes, and teens in grades 6 through 10 are most likely to be involved in activities related to bullying (Bullying). This is a large problem and one that many junior high students face in some form. Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* is the victim of bullying tactics that are very similar to tactics used today. A fake love letter tricks him into believing that a girl likes him and he acts like a fool as a result, which leads him to be taunted and humiliated. Robin Bates, an English teacher, discussed how a student in her class related to Malvolio because of situations that happened to him in his own life, and he came to the conclusion that the bullies attacked both him and Malvolio as a result of class insecurity (Bates). Students reading *Twelfth Night* in recent
years have identified that the fake love letter trick is used in cyber-bullying with similar consequences to its victims (Giguere 6). Along with relationships between boys and girls, students reading Twelfth Night can also identify with the relationships between the bully and the bullied and they can learn how to overcome these problems.

In 2011, a team that included teachers and the Colorado Shakespeare Association demonstrated how Shakespeare can help junior high students by doing Twelfth Night anti-bullying workshops in schools all over Colorado with great success (Wegrzyn). The company performed the sections of the play in which Malvolio is picked on and the students then reenacted them and gained insights into how they could intervene in similar situations to help bullied victims. Through these workshops, students related Shakespeare to the real world and found ways to address their bullying problems. Using Twelfth Night as a tool to help students with this specific aspect of their lives gave them greater accessibility to Shakespeare and his language and gave them the opportunity to interact with the Bard’s text on a personal level. In a regular classroom this could be used to the same effect, helping students in a way superior to Romeo and Juliet, which does not have these sequences of bullying.

Another damaging phenomenon that is sweeping through the adolescents’ world and can be addressed with Twelfth Night is fantasy. Teenagers live in a cyber-world, filled with opportunities for “nine lives” and with perfectly packaged endings. Movies and television and video games pull them away from reality. Many works of literature add to this problem, as concerns within the text are easily wrapped up into the general Hollywood plotline. The historical context of Twelfth Night and its implications in the text invite the audience to move away from a suspension of reality, including the realities in relationships and bullying, and this provides other ways in which this play can be relevant and valuable in a junior high student’s
life. *Twelfth Night* contains a lack of resolution that can help students wake up to reality. The main cases of irresolution are Malvolio’s cries of revenge and Feste’s somber closing song. *Twelfth Night* goes against the pattern of the perfect comedy because of these moments in the play. Both can teach important lessons to junior high students. There are historical reasons for this irresolution.

The play was first performed on the twelfth night after Christmas, or the Feast of Epiphany, which is the last day of Christmas festivities before the beginning of Lent (Warren and Wells 5). This context helps the audience better understand why *Twelfth Night* ends without complete resolution. Bristol explains this: “Since this was the last feast before Lenten season, the holiday becomes a bacchanal, a saturnalian release, in which the celebrants suspend normal order and create a topsy-turvy world, a reign of misrule. Thus, carnivalesque behaviors challenge and slash with Lenten expectations, a battle never completely resolved” (80). The play follows the theme of the holiday in its topsy-turvy world of mixed up genders and identities and confused romance. Like the holiday, it comes to a close with the clash of festivity and expectations of reality. It reminds the audience that festivities end and life goes on. Helping students understand the contextual reasons for the play’s ending can give them opportunities to make connections between literature and history while teaching them an important life lesson, which is the necessity of facing life’s problems rather than hiding in a fanciful world of entertainment.

The historical context of *Twelfth Night* helps students understand how this particular comedy can invite the audience to remember reality, even though Shakespeare’s comedies are generally known for being fantastic and requiring a suspension of reality. With the emphasis on the festive season there are certainly aspects of that in this play. Viola and Sebastian are separated in a shipwreck and each thinks the other is dead. Though they are different genders,
they are identical when Viola puts on boy clothes, as people confuse one for the other multiple times (an entertaining feature which draws both youth and adults in). The play goes against its own fantastical nature by closing without perfect resolution. This is an invitation to step out of the fake land of perfect endings and “happily ever afters.”

The first instance of this has to do with the bullying of Malvolio, which is not resolved and which sets a dark tone for the close of the novel. As the bullying of Malvolio is brought into the open he swears, “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you” (5.1.452), and this is the last we hear from him. Duke Orsino sends someone after him to find out where Viola’s clothes are and to try to make peace, but there is no evidence that the messenger was successful. The play ends without compensation for the wrongs that have been made against him and without his forgiveness of the bullies. It also ends without the revenge occurring, and thus the revenge cannot be resolved. One student compared Malvolio to other bullied people in real life who turned violent, such as the attackers in Columbine (Bates). Malvolio’s ominous statement carries with it implications that there are consequences for one’s actions that are not easily swept away with the close of the play or with the close of the school year. The consequences of bullying can be long-lasting and they can have very destructive results.

Another example of the play’s lack of resolution and the ways that it can teach valuable lessons to junior high students is in Feste the Clown’s closing song. This is one of the most obvious proof of the play’s lack of perfect resolution despite the happy marriages of the main characters. Feste sings about growing from young to old and repeats the phrase, “For the rain it raineth every day” (5.1.464-484). This theme reminds the audience that with living comes age and the showers of trouble. Goddard explains:
The thing that this society of pleasure-seekers has forgotten is the wind and the rain. It's all right to play with toys while we are children, and later we may thrive for a little time by swaggering or crime. But knaves and thieves are soon barred out. There is such a thing as coming to a man's estate, such a hard reality. (305)

The pleasure-seekers that Goddard refers to are the characters in Twelfth Night, but also the play’s audience and students. While it provides an entertaining escape from reality, it reminds the audience that even though they have just spent some time seeking the pleasure of the stage, life is still not perfect, and that it flows on to more problems after problems are resolved. This is an important lesson for junior high students to learn as they are in the process of growing from children to adults, or coming to their “man’s estate,” while living in this world of pleasure-seekers. Despite these slightly disconcerting undertones, though, the play still ends mostly happily. All of the right couples are matched up and married. As a result, the reminder of the pains of reality is gentle and the audience is still left entertained and with an overall message of hope, which junior high students can benefit from.

In discussing junior high experiences with Shakespeare with friends and acquaintances I learned that many students study Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Much Ado About Nothing, and Taming of the Shrew, but few study Twelfth Night. When this play is studied, it is entirely appropriate for them and they enjoy it (Stringham). This play has a lot to offer students at the beginning of their relationship with this master of the English language, as it relates in many ways to experiences that are typical of their age, such as bullying and new experiences with relationships. The entertaining and applicable plot of Twelfth Night leaves impressions on students about Shakespeare and his work that can last throughout their lives and influence what
they are able to gain from him. *Twelfth Night* is the perfect play to jumpstart a love affair with Shakespeare’s works.
Works Cited


Stringham, Scott. “I think it is entirely appropriate for junior high kids to study. The kids I directed earlier this year were in grades 6-8, and they loved it. As with all Shakespeare, there are several adult-oriented jokes, but they don't get them unless you explain them. Mostly, they love the humor and giggle about Olivia falling in love with Viola on accident.” 8 Dec 2012, 10:56 a.m. Facebook.
