



Tikrit University
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Title: Study guide of *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare

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Study Guide of *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare



KYE FACTS ABOUT *TWELFTH NIGHT*

- **Full Title:** *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*
- **When Written:** c. 1601
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** Illyria

Twelfth Night is one of William Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, it blends romance, mistaken identity, music, and playful chaos into a story that explores love in all its strange and sometimes absurd forms. The play is set in the fictional land of Illyria, a dreamy, almost magical coastal world where reality feels flexible and emotions run high. The title refers to the Twelfth Night, the final evening of the Christmas season—a time historically associated with celebration, disguise, and social role reversal. That festive spirit shapes the entire play.

Twelfth Night is the only play of Shakespeare's with an alternate name: its full title is *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. The second title suggests **freedom of interpretation**—the audience is invited to enjoy the play in their own way without a single fixed meaning. It serves as a playful, multi-layered invitation that reflects the play's themes of misrule, fluid identity, and unchecked desire.

The play mixes lighthearted comedy with moments of melancholy. Music plays a key role—Orsino’s famous opening line, “*If music be the food of love, play on,*” sets the tone for a story full of emotional intensity and poetic beauty. *Twelfth Night* remains popular because of its timeless exploration of love, gender roles, and human folly. It’s often seen as one of Shakespeare’s most balanced comedies—both hilarious and emotionally rich, playful yet thoughtful.

The plot begins with a shipwreck. A young noblewoman named Viola is washed ashore, believing her twin brother Sebastian has drowned. Alone in a foreign land, she disguises herself as a young man named Cesario to serve Duke Orsino.

Orsino is deeply in love with Lady Olivia. **Olivia**, however, is mourning her brother and refuses Orsino’s advances. When **Cesario (Viola in disguise)** is sent to woo Olivia on Orsino’s behalf, Olivia instead falls in love with Cesario. This creates a tangled love triangle:

- Viola (as Cesario) loves Orsino.
- Orsino loves Olivia.
- Olivia loves Cesario (not knowing Cesario is actually Viola).

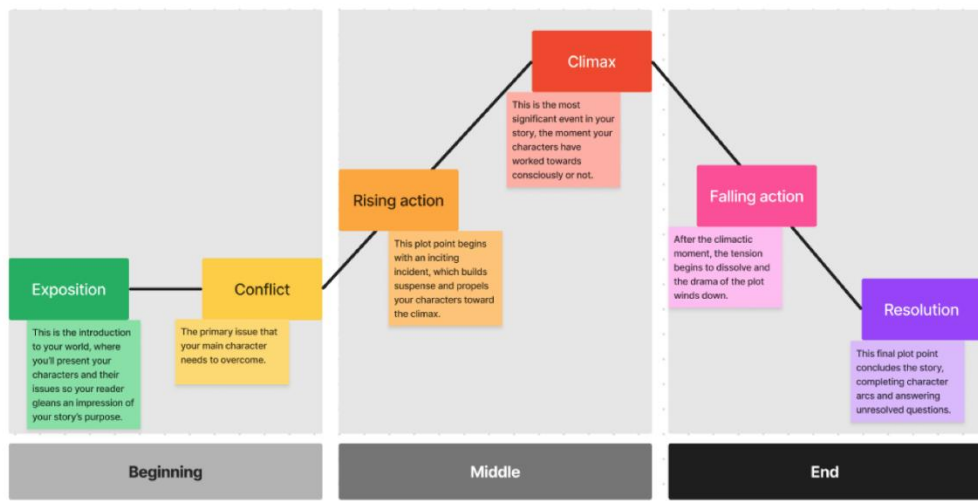
Meanwhile, Sebastian—Viola’s twin—turns out to be alive and eventually arrives in Illyria. Because he looks identical to Viola in disguise, confusion escalates until identities are revealed and the romantic knots are untangled.

Alongside the main story is a **comedic subplot** involving Olivia’s household:

- Sir Toby Belch, a rowdy uncle
- Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a foolish suitor
- Maria, Olivia’s clever maid
- Malvolio, Olivia’s strict and self-righteous steward

They play a cruel prank on Malvolio, forging a letter that makes him believe Olivia is in love with him. His ridiculous behavior (smiling constantly, wearing yellow stockings cross-gartered) leads to his humiliation. This subplot adds darker humor and raises questions about cruelty and self-delusion.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLOT



Exposition

1. Orsino loves Olivia, who won't see him.

Rising Action

2. Viola goes to work for Orsino dressed as a boy (Cesario).
3. Orsino sends Cesario to woo Olivia, but Viola loves Orsino.
4. Viola (as Cesario) woos Olivia, who falls in love with her.
5. Sebastian appears in Illyria, having been saved by Antonio.
6. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria play a trick on Malvolio.
7. Antonio saves Cesario from a duel, thinking he is Sebastian.
8. Olivia asks Sebastian to marry her, thinking he is Cesario.

Climax

9. Viola and Sebastian finally meet face-to-face.

Falling Action

10. Orsino vows to marry Viola.
11. Olivia learns how Malvolio was tricked and frees him.

Resolution

12. Celebration of characters' union

CHARACTERS ANALYSIS

Viola is the central figure of the play and one of Shakespeare's most complex and compelling heroines. After being shipwrecked in Illyria and believing her twin brother dead, she disguises herself as a young man named Cesario in order to survive. This disguise places her at the heart of the play's emotional and dramatic tensions. Viola is intelligent, perceptive, and emotionally disciplined; unlike many other characters, she does not rush blindly into love but instead experiences it with depth and restraint. Her love for Orsino is sincere, yet she must conceal it, creating a sense of quiet suffering that distinguishes her from the more impulsive lovers around her. Through Viola, Shakespeare explores themes of identity and gender fluidity, as her male disguise allows her to move between social roles and challenge traditional boundaries.

Duke Orsino From the very beginning of the play, Orsino presents himself as a man consumed by passion, famously declaring his desire to be overwhelmed by music and emotion. However, his love for Olivia appears more performative than sincere; he is captivated by the idea of love rather than by Olivia herself. Orsino enjoys the experience of longing and surrounds himself with the aesthetics of romance, yet he fails to recognize the authentic devotion of Viola, who stands beside him. His swift shift of affection from Olivia to Viola at the end of the play suggests that his emotions are flexible and perhaps superficial. Through Orsino, Shakespeare critiques a certain kind of idealized, narcissistic love that is more about self-expression than true connection.

Olivia is introduced as a strong and independent noblewoman who has sworn to mourn her brother and reject all romantic advances, including those of Orsino. However, her emotional control quickly unravels when she meets Cesario, with whom she becomes infatuated almost instantly. This sudden change reveals the unpredictable and irrational nature of love, a central theme of the play. Olivia's character demonstrates both power and vulnerability: she exercises authority in managing her household and dismissing Orsino, yet she becomes powerless in the face of her own emotions.

Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, serves as both her counterpart and the key to resolving the play's central confusion. While Viola is introspective and cautious, Sebastian is more direct and action-oriented. His arrival in Illyria creates a series of mistaken identities that drive the plot toward its resolution, particularly when Olivia mistakes him for Cesario and quickly marries him. Although his role may seem less psychologically developed than Viola's, Sebastian represents the restoration of order and clarity. His presence resolves the tangled relationships and allows truth to emerge from deception. In this way, he symbolizes the return to stability after the chaos created by disguise and misunderstanding.

Feste, the clown or fool, the mouthpiece of Shakespeare, is perhaps the most insightful character in the play. Though he occupies a low social position, he demonstrates remarkable intelligence and perceptiveness. Feste moves freely between different social groups, offering commentary on their behavior through wit, wordplay, and song. Unlike other characters, he is not deceived by appearances or illusions; he sees the truth behind their actions and often

exposes their foolishness indirectly. Feste embodies the idea that wisdom can be found in unexpected places, and that the line between folly and insight is often thin.

THEMES

Love, In *Twelfth Night*, love is portrayed as a powerful, often chaotic force that transcends gender and social status, manifesting as both a source of joy and profound suffering. The play explores various forms of love—romantic, familial, and self-love—frequently blurring the lines between them. Through multiple relationships and contrasting characters, the play shows that love is not one fixed emotion but a range of experiences shaped by desire, imagination, and circumstance.

The theme of love in **Twelfth Night** by William Shakespeare is presented as irrational, and often unpredictable. Characters fall in love quickly and without clear reason, showing that love is driven more by emotion than logic. Olivia suddenly falls for Cesario, while Orsino claims deep love for Olivia but easily shifts his feelings to Viola. This suggests that love is unstable and constantly changing.

Shakespeare also shows love as a form of illusion. Many characters are not in love with real people but with idealized images. Orsino enjoys the feeling of being in love, and Olivia loves Cesario without knowing his true identity. Through this, the play suggests that love can blind people and lead them to misunderstand reality.

Overall, love in *Twelfth Night* is both joyful and painful. It creates happiness and union in the end, but also causes confusion, longing, and suffering along the way.