

TWELFTH NIGHT

Teachers' Notes

This 'Twelfth Night' study guide is aimed at students of GCSE Media Studies and English and A' Level English. The series aims to provide teachers with a resource which will be invaluable to the teaching of Shakespeare throughout the English curriculum. Areas covered in 'Twelfth Night' include: the setting of the film; the language of the text; filming comedy; filming images; themes and images of the language and the plot of the play; the opening and the end of the film. There will be an accompanying wall chart which uses stills from the film to help explain the complicated series of changing relationships within the text of 'Twelfth Night'.

Synopsis

'Twelfth Night' was written about 1600. A ship carrying identical twins, Viola and Sebastian, is shipwrecked off the coast of Illyria (nominally a country on the Dalmatian coast, but really a place born of Shakespeare's imagination). Washed ashore, Viola supposes that her twin is dead. She hears that she is not far from the house of Olivia, a noblewoman who has lately lost both her father and her brother. Olivia now lives with her maid Maria and her uncle Sir Toby Belch. Olivia has resolved to mourn for seven years, and is rejecting the advances of Orsino, Duke of Illyria. Viola disguises herself as a boy and enters the service of Orsino, becoming the go-between in his wooing of Olivia. Both lord and lady develop jealous passions for Cesario, as Viola styles herself. Sir Toby Belch encourages his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek to woo Olivia while plotting, Malvolio's humiliation. Matters are further complicated when Sebastian emerges from the sea and is saved by Antonio. Sebastian is mistaken for Viola and finds himself borne off to marriage with Olivia. After a great deal of harrowing misunderstanding, matters are duly resolved, and everyone marries someone of the opposite sex.



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Twelfth Night

Dir: Trevor Nunn

Certificate: U

Running Time: 135mins

The film of 'Twelfth Night' has been directed by Trevor Nunn. For eighteen years he was head of the Royal Shakespeare Company and is world renowned for his stage productions. Surprisingly, he has never directed 'Twelfth Night' for the stage although he has always wanted to do so. What were his intentions in setting out to make the film?

"'Twelfth Night' is a strange mixture of poignant romance, broad comedy and subtle melancholy. I've set out four or even five times to do it, and thought about it a great deal. Each time I had the urge to make the content of the play more real, less stylised, so that the extremes are seen in a real social context. So it is saying we really do behave this way; the play is true, and we can't get off the hook by dismissing it as an improbable comedy. Its an examination of gender as an essential ingredient of a love story. Shakespeare seems to be playing with the attraction of woman in man and man in woman."

The Setting of the Film

In filming a Shakespearean text a decision has to be made as to what period in history you are going to set the film. One possibility is to set it in Shakespeare's day, another would be to set it in the present day. Shakespeare himself does not set the film in England but in the mythical country of Illyria. The filmmakers have set their version of 'Twelfth Night' in the 1890's in a middle european country which is at war.

TASK

Look at this list of elements of the play.

What problems would there be in putting the film in a modern setting?

Viola has to disguise herself as a boy in such a way that:

None of the characters suspect she is a boy.

She can be mistaken for her twin brother.

She can pass for a boy in a male dominated society.

Malvolio has to be in charge of Olivia's house hold.

He has to appear cross-gartered in yellow stockings.

He has to be put away and treated as a mad man.

Olivia has a fool, Feste, who has been absent.

He is able to go where he wants including visiting the Duke's house.

Once you have completed the task how have the filmmakers solved these problems by setting the play when and where they have?

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The Language of the Text

In turning a Shakespearean play into a film there is always the problem of how you are going to deal with the language of the original play. Filmscripts usually contain much less dialogue than a play because you can tell the story with pictures instead of words.

TASK

In preparing a screen play, what problems are there in cutting a Shakespearean text?



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Filming Comedy

Verbal humour is most appropriate to the audience for which it is written. Filmmakers cannot expect a modern audience to understand Elizabethan jokes.

TASK

In what ways can the humour of the original play be transferred to the screen?

Can you create a visual humour which is obvious to a modern audience but in keeping with the original text. For example, what happens to Sir Andrew Aguecheek when he and Sir Toby are rolling around with laughter on the croquet lawn after the tricking of Malvolio, and why is Sir Andrew wearing a yellow waistcoat?



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Filming Images

Shakespeare was writing plays to be performed in natural light on a very bare stage with a company of actors some of whom had to play more than one part. Because of these factors he has to write into the play more basic information than a filmscript and if there is a lapse of time inbetween scenes he has to remind us what is happening, e.g. Sir Toby has to tell us that he is going to have Malvolio put into a dark room. When Feste goes to visit him Later, Malvolio tells us he is in a dark room. In this way we have to think of the text in the same way as a radio play.

When transferring images to the screen these words, telling us of various events, can be shown as images. Just as in the same way as the images in the text can link so the way that you film a scene, or a combination of scenes, can have a resonance that adds to the film's atmosphere and style, e.g. in the theme of death it is obvious that characters can be dressed in mourning but when Viola and her friends are first escaping from the soldiers they hide in a graveyard and observe Olivia from there going into a chapel.

TASK

The film is shot in autumn. What sort of resonances does this time of the year have? Are some of them positive and some negative? How can these resonances be shown on film?



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Themes and Images in the Play

In studying the text of a play by William Shakespeare it becomes apparent that several strands of the plot can be connected because they are commenting on the same subject from a different viewpoint. We call these plot connections, the themes of a play, e.g. in 'Twelfth Night' one of the themes is death and especially the death of a brother. Olivia is in mourning because her brother is dead whilst Viola thinks that her brother is dead.

Within the scenes the characters use descriptive phrases to make the language more imaginative. This language can also create images in the listener's mind and the various images could also be connected around the same subject. What makes 'Twelfth Night' special is that the subject matter of these images is often the same as the themes of the play, e.g. Feste's song about unrequited love likens a broken heart to death: 'Come away come away death.'

TASK

Look at the plot synopsis of the first two acts of 'Twelfth Night', shown at the back of this guide. The left hand column describes what happens in each scene; the right hand column gives important lines and images from each scene. What are the themes of the play? How are these themes reflected in the imagery?

Extension Task

When you have completed the previous task, either take a further act or follow through one of the plot lines of the play and see if the same themes and images continue.



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The Opening of the Film

The first part of the film, before the titles, is not in the play but is an enactment of what happens before and during the shipwreck with a voice-over from Feste. It is there to help make some of the more complicated elements of the plot clearer. It also establishes some of the visual themes of the film.

The sequence opens on board a ship full of wealthy people enjoying themselves. A cabaret is being performed by the twins Sebastian and Viola. Viola is playing the piano. At first they appear to be dressed as harem girls and are indistinguishable. Antonio is seen laughing at them in the background. However, when they lift their veils they are both revealed to be wearing false beards and moustaches. The ship hits bad weather and goes out of control. The twins fall into the water and despite clutching each other's hands they are separated. Both appear to drown but Viola is washed up onto the beach and we see Antonio saving Sebastian. The voice-over tells us that Illyria is at war with the twins own country of Messaline.



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The End of the Film

Is 'Twelfth Night' a comedy? There are certainly elements of visual and verbal comedy in it but its themes include death and despair, ridicule and madness. It is very much a play about the human condition and what we learn on our journey through life. The ending of the film is particularly well done because it really contrasts the jollity of the young lovers dancing at their betrothal with images of the other characters in the piece going off to face the world.

TASK

Consider what has happened to the following characters in the film and what our last images of them are? Does this last image of them foretell what may befall them next?

Sir Toby Belch | *Maria* | *Sir Andrew Aguecheek* | *Malvolio* | *Antonio* | *Feste*



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PLOT SYNOPSIS

Act 1

Scene 1

Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, tells us that he is in love with the Lady Olivia. However, she has vowed to not see a man for seven years because she is in mourning for the death of her brother.

*Duke*

If music be the food of Love, play on,

Valentine

*But like a cloistress she will veiled walk,
And water once a day her chamber round
With eye-offenoing brine:*

Duke

*O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou,
That notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the sea,*

Scene 2

Viola has been saved from a shipwreck. She thinks that her twin brother, Sebastian, may have drowned or by some miracle may have been saved. She knows of Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, and says that she will present herself at his court disguised as a boy. She is also told of the plight of Olivia and says she would like to serve her.

*Viola*

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

Viola

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid

Viola

*...for I can sing,
And speak to him in many kinds of music,*

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Scene 3

We are introduced to Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, and her maid, Maria. Olivia and her maid both disapprove of Sir Toby's drunkenness and his friendship with Sir Andrew Aguecheek who is a suitor for Olivia's hand. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew talk about the arts that a gentleman should have and their own love of eating and drinking.



Sir And

I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether.

Scene 4

It is three days later and already Viola, in the disguise of Cesario, is being entrusted by Orsino to take love messages to Olivia. The dramatic irony of the situation is that Viola is herself in love with Orsino and he in turn is subconsciously attracted to her.

Duke of Viola

*...I have unclasp'd
To thee the book even of my secret soul.*

Scene 5

We find out that Feste, Olivia's fool, has been absent. He talks in truthful riddles about relationships. Feste riddles with Olivia about the foolishness of her situation. Malvolio is so full of his own importance that he cannot cope with the teasing and chiding of Feste. Sir Toby comes in drunk and announces Cesario to be at the gate. Malvolio tries to send him away but eventually he is allowed in to a veiled Olivia who allows him to tell her Orsino's message. In the process Olivia is entranced by Cesario.



Feste

I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether.

Feste

The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven.

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Scene 5 (contd)

**Olivia**

but we will draw the curtain and show you the picture!

Viola

*Lady, you are the crull'st alive
If you will lead these graces to the grave
And leave the world no copy.*

Viola

*Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house:*

Act 2

Scene 1

At last we discover that Viola's twin, Sebastian, has also survived the shipwreck having been saved by Antonio. Sebastian in turn thinks that his sister is dead.

Sebastian

*She is drowned already, sir, with salt water,
though I seem to drown her remembrance
again with more.*

Scene 2

Malvolio chases after Cesario to 'return the ring', he thinks, whereas Olivia is really sending a ring to Cesario. Viola realises that disguising herself as the boy Cesario has caused yet a further complication for Olivia. Olivia not realising Cesario is a girl, has fallen in love with her.

**Viola**

*...As I am man,
My state is desperate for my master's love:
As I am woman (now alas the day!)
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia
breathe?*

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Scene 3

Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are up late in Olivia's house. Feste sings them a song and then all three of them join in a catch or round. Their noise first awakens Maria and then Malvolio and threatens the singers with their having to leave the house. The way that he does this upsets Maria and with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew she begins the plot to leave the letter for Malvolio to find. He will be convinced that Olivia loves him and they will have their revenge.



Feste sings

*Journeys end in lovers meeting.
Every wise man's son doth know.*

Maria

*I will plant you two, and let the fool make a
third, where he shall find the letter: observe
his construction of it.*

Scene 4

After the humour of the previous scene comes the contrast of this scene where Orsina, the Duke of Illyria, is telling Cesario how obsessed he is with Olivia. Feste is in the house and the Duke asks him to sing the sad song he sang the night before about a man who dies for love. Viola (Cesario) tells how her 'father's daughter' died for love.



Feste's song

*Come away, come away death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fie away, fie away breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid:*

Viola

*...she never told her love,
But let concealment like a worm i'th'bud
Feed on her damask cheek: she pin'd in
thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like Patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?*

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Scene 5

The plot against Malvolio is started in earnest. Maria sets the trap in placing the letter on the croquet lawn and Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian watch him being taken in. Malvolio now believes that Olivia is in love with him and knows the course of action he has to take to please her in his manner and his dress.

*Malvolio (Reads)**Jove knows I love;**But who?**Lips, do not move**No man must know.*