

# twelfth night or what you will

**twelfth night or what you will** is one of William Shakespeare's most celebrated comedies, known for its intricate plot, memorable characters, and exploration of themes such as identity, love, and festivity. The play, often simply referred to as *Twelfth Night*, has captivated audiences for centuries with its witty dialogue and clever use of disguise and mistaken identity. This article delves into the historical context, plot summary, character analysis, themes, and the enduring legacy of *Twelfth Night or What You Will*. By examining these aspects, readers gain a comprehensive understanding of why this Shakespearean work remains relevant in contemporary literature and theater. The discussion will also highlight the stylistic elements and dramatic techniques employed by Shakespeare, offering insight into the play's artistic merit. To provide a structured exploration, the article is organized into clear sections that cover the various dimensions of this timeless comedy.

- Historical Context and Background
- Plot Summary of *Twelfth Night or What You Will*
- Main Characters and Their Roles
- Themes and Motifs in *Twelfth Night or What You Will*
- Literary Style and Dramatic Techniques
- *Twelfth Night's* Influence and Legacy

## Historical Context and Background

*Twelfth Night or What You Will* was written by William Shakespeare around 1601–1602 and first performed in the early 17th century. The play's title references the Twelfth Night holiday, the evening before Epiphany, traditionally celebrated with revelry and role reversals, which aligns with the play's themes of disguise and festivity. This context is essential for understanding the cultural significance of the play during the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night* during a period rich in theatrical experimentation and social commentary, allowing the play to reflect contemporary issues such as gender roles and social hierarchy. The play is categorized as a comedy, featuring mistaken identities, romantic entanglements, and humorous situations typical of Shakespeare's comedic works. Understanding the historical background enriches the appreciation of the play's intricate plot and thematic depth.

## Elizabethan Theatre and Audience

The play was performed in public theaters, such as the Globe Theatre, where audiences

were diverse, ranging from commoners to nobility. Elizabethan theater often combined music, dance, and elaborate costumes, elements that are present in *Twelfth Night*'s festive atmosphere. The audience's familiarity with the *Twelfth Night* holiday would have enhanced their enjoyment of the play's humor and social satire.

## **Origins of the Title**

The phrase "What You Will" in the title suggests a playful invitation to interpret the play in multiple ways. It emphasizes the flexibility of identity and the blurring of reality and illusion, which are central to the plot. The title itself sets the tone for the whimsical and unpredictable narrative that follows.

## **Plot Summary of *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will***

The plot of *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will* centers around the shipwrecked twins Viola and Sebastian, who find themselves separated in the fictional land of Illyria. Viola disguises herself as a young man named Cesario to serve Duke Orsino, who is in love with Countess Olivia. However, Olivia falls in love with Cesario, unaware of Viola's true identity, while Viola secretly harbors feelings for Orsino. This complex love triangle drives much of the play's action, accompanied by subplots involving mistaken identities and comic characters.

## **Viola's Disguise and Orsino's Love**

Viola's decision to assume the identity of Cesario initiates a series of misunderstandings and comedic situations. Orsino uses Cesario as an intermediary to express his love for Olivia, unaware that Cesario is actually Viola. The disguise theme explores issues of gender fluidity and social roles, highlighting Shakespeare's innovative narrative techniques.

## **Olivia's Affections and Malvolio's Subplot**

Olivia's unexpected love for Cesario complicates the romantic dynamics, creating dramatic irony as the audience knows Viola's true identity. Meanwhile, the subplot involving Malvolio, Olivia's steward, adds humor and satire as he is tricked into believing Olivia loves him. These parallel plots intertwine to create a rich tapestry of comedy and social commentary.

## **Resolution and Reunion**

The play concludes with the reunion of Viola and Sebastian, the revelation of true identities, and the resolution of romantic tensions. Orsino proposes to Viola, and Olivia marries Sebastian, bringing harmony to the previously chaotic relationships. The ending reinforces themes of love's unpredictability and the restoration of social order.

# **Main Characters and Their Roles**

Twelfth Night or What You Will features a diverse cast of characters, each contributing uniquely to the narrative's complexity and humor. The interplay between characters drives the plot and highlights the thematic concerns of the play.

## **Viola / Cesario**

Viola, the protagonist, is intelligent, resourceful, and compassionate. Her disguise as Cesario allows Shakespeare to explore gender roles and identity. Viola's loyalty and wit endear her to both Orsino and the audience, making her one of Shakespeare's most nuanced female characters.

## **Duke Orsino**

Orsino is a romantic nobleman obsessed with Olivia's love. His character embodies the theme of romantic idealism and the folly of unrequited love. Orsino's interactions with Cesario/Viola reveal his complexities and eventual growth.

## **Olivia**

Countess Olivia is a wealthy noblewoman mourning her brother's death. Her swift shift from mourning to romantic pursuit of Cesario highlights themes of love's irrationality. Olivia's assertiveness contrasts with traditional female roles of the period.

## **Malvolio and Other Comic Characters**

Malvolio serves as the play's puritanical antagonist, whose self-love and ambition make him a target for ridicule. Other comic figures, such as Sir Toby Belch and Maria, provide humor through their schemes and interactions, enriching the play's social satire.

## **Supporting Characters**

Characters like Sebastian, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Feste the clown add layers of humor and complexity. Feste, in particular, functions as a witty commentator on the events, underscoring the play's themes of folly and wisdom.

## **Themes and Motifs in Twelfth Night or What You Will**

Several prominent themes run throughout Twelfth Night or What You Will, contributing to its status as a classic comedy. These themes explore human nature, social conventions,

and the transformative power of love and festivity.

## **Identity and Disguise**

The use of disguise and mistaken identity is central to the play. Viola's male persona, Cesario, challenges traditional gender norms and allows Shakespeare to explore the fluidity of identity. Characters' inability to recognize true identities leads to comic situations and commentary on appearance versus reality.

## **Love and Desire**

Love in *Twelfth Night* is portrayed as unpredictable, irrational, and multifaceted. The love triangle among Viola, Orsino, and Olivia reveals different expressions of desire, from unrequited love to disguised affection. The play questions conventional ideas about love and courtship.

## **Festivity and Disorder**

The play's setting around the Twelfth Night holiday symbolizes a time of revelry and social inversion. This motif manifests in the chaotic relationships and comic confusion, ultimately resolved by the restoration of order. The theme reflects the tension between societal norms and human impulses.

## **Social Ambition and Class**

Characters like Malvolio illustrate issues of social ambition and class mobility. His humiliation exposes the rigidity of social hierarchies and the dangers of overreaching one's social status. The interactions between nobility and servants highlight class tensions present in the play.

## **Literary Style and Dramatic Techniques**

Shakespeare's use of language and dramatic structure in *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will* exemplify his mastery of comedic writing. The play combines poetic dialogue, witty wordplay, and intricate plotting to engage audiences intellectually and emotionally.

## **Use of Verse and Prose**

The interplay between verse and prose distinguishes characters and situations. Noble characters often speak in iambic pentameter, while comic characters use prose, enhancing the play's tonal variety. This stylistic choice aids characterization and mood setting.

## Humor and Irony

Humor arises from dramatic irony, puns, and slapstick elements. The audience's awareness of Viola's disguise creates situational irony, deepening the comedic effect. Malvolio's subplot provides physical comedy alongside sharp satire of social pretensions.

## Symbolism and Imagery

Shakespeare employs symbolism, such as the shipwreck representing disruption and new beginnings. Imagery related to vision and disguise reinforces themes of perception and reality. The festive setting imbues the play with a rich sensory atmosphere.

## Twelfth Night's Influence and Legacy

Twelfth Night or What You Will has had a lasting impact on literature, theater, and popular culture. Its exploration of identity and gender has inspired countless adaptations and critical interpretations. The play remains a staple in Shakespearean repertoires worldwide.

## Adaptations and Performances

The play has been adapted into various formats, including film, opera, and modern theater productions. Directors often emphasize its themes of gender fluidity and social satire to resonate with contemporary audiences. Twelfth Night's versatility ensures its continued relevance.

## Critical Reception and Scholarship

Scholars have extensively analyzed Twelfth Night for its complex characters and thematic richness. Critical discussions often focus on its treatment of gender and the subversion of Elizabethan social norms. The play is considered a masterpiece of Shakespearean comedy.

## Cultural Impact

Elements from Twelfth Night have permeated popular culture, influencing language, literature, and media. Its memorable characters and quotable lines contribute to its enduring popularity. The play's themes continue to provoke thought about love, identity, and society.

- Viola's cross-dressing as Cesario
- The love triangle between Viola, Orsino, and Olivia

- Malvolio's comic humiliation
- The festive setting of Illyria
- Use of mistaken identity and dramatic irony
- The resolution of romantic and social conflicts

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the central theme of Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night or What You Will'?**

The central theme of 'Twelfth Night' is the complexity of love, exploring its various forms such as unrequited love, mistaken identity in love, and the folly and joy that love can bring.

### **How does mistaken identity drive the plot in 'Twelfth Night'?**

Mistaken identity is a key plot device in 'Twelfth Night,' primarily through Viola disguising herself as Cesario, which creates dramatic irony and leads to romantic misunderstandings and comic situations.

### **Who are the main characters in 'Twelfth Night' and what roles do they play?**

The main characters include Viola, who disguises herself as Cesario; Duke Orsino, who is in love with Olivia; Olivia, who falls for Cesario; and Malvolio, Olivia's steward who becomes the target of a prank.

### **What is the significance of the title 'Twelfth Night or What You Will'?**

The title refers to the Twelfth Night holiday, a time of festivity and role reversals, reflecting the play's themes of disguise, revelry, and the subversion of social norms. 'What You Will' suggests the play's flexible, playful nature.

### **How does Shakespeare use humor in 'Twelfth Night'?**

Shakespeare uses a mix of witty dialogue, physical comedy, and absurd situations, especially through characters like Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Malvolio, to create humor that also critiques social behaviors.

# What role does gender disguise play in 'Twelfth Night'?

Gender disguise, primarily through Viola's cross-dressing, challenges traditional gender roles and highlights themes of identity, attraction, and the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

## How does 'Twelfth Night' explore the idea of social class?

The play contrasts characters from different social classes, such as the nobility and servants, often using humor and irony to critique social hierarchies and show that folly and wisdom exist across all levels.

## Additional Resources

### 1. *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night: A Critical Reader*

This book offers a comprehensive collection of critical essays on \*Twelfth Night\*, exploring themes such as gender, identity, and festivity. It provides historical context alongside modern interpretations, making it valuable for both students and scholars. The reader delves into the play's structure, language, and its enduring appeal in theatrical performances.

### 2. *Disguises and Desire in Twelfth Night*

Focusing on the motif of disguise and mistaken identity, this book analyzes how Shakespeare uses these elements to explore human desire and social roles. It examines the complexities of characters like Viola and Malvolio, highlighting the fluidity of gender and power in the play. The book also discusses the broader Elizabethan context of disguise in drama.

### 3. *Performing Twelfth Night: Staging and Spectacle*

This volume looks at the various ways \*Twelfth Night\* has been staged across different cultures and time periods. It covers the challenges directors face in balancing comedy, romance, and social critique. The book includes case studies of notable productions and insights into set design, costumes, and actor interpretations.

### 4. *The Language of Wit in Twelfth Night*

An exploration of Shakespeare's use of wordplay, puns, and rhetoric in \*Twelfth Night\*, this book highlights how language drives the humor and plot. It examines characters such as Feste the fool, who uses wit to navigate social hierarchies. The analysis reveals the deeper significance of Shakespeare's linguistic creativity in shaping character and theme.

### 5. *Gender and Identity in Shakespeare's Comedies*

While covering multiple plays, this book places a strong emphasis on \*Twelfth Night\*'s treatment of gender roles and identity fluidity. It discusses how Shakespeare challenges traditional binaries through characters like Viola and Sebastian. The book also explores the implications of these themes for contemporary gender studies.

### 6. *Twelfth Night on Film and Television*

This book surveys various adaptations of \*Twelfth Night\* in film and television, from classic renditions to modern reinterpretations. It analyzes how different directors

approach the play's comedic and romantic elements. The book also considers how visual media transforms Shakespeare's text for new audiences.

#### 7. *Festivity and Folly: The Social World of Twelfth Night*

Examining the play's setting within the context of Elizabethan festivity, this book explores themes of revelry, social inversion, and the carnivalesque. It discusses how \*Twelfth Night\* reflects and critiques social hierarchies through humor and chaos. The work connects the play to broader cultural traditions of holiday celebrations.

#### 8. *Shakespeare's Viola: The Art of Disguise and Performance*

Dedicated to the character of Viola, this book investigates her role as a master of disguise and performance within the play. It explores themes of identity, agency, and the performative nature of gender. The analysis also considers Viola's significance as a figure of resilience and adaptability.

#### 9. *Comedy and Tragedy in Twelfth Night*

This book examines the interplay between comedic elements and underlying tragic tones in \*Twelfth Night\*. It discusses how themes of love, loss, and mistaken identity create a complex emotional landscape. The study highlights Shakespeare's skill in blending humor with poignant reflections on human experience.

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