

Twelfth Night

by William Shakespeare · Language: EN

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Overview

Twelfth Night, or What You Will is one of William Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, a play about mistaken identity, love's folly, and the joy of festive misrule. Set in the fictional kingdom of Illyria, the story begins with a shipwreck that separates twins Viola and Sebastian. Viola, believing her brother is dead, disguises herself as a young man named Cesario and enters the service of Duke Orsino. Orsino is hopelessly in love with the Countess Olivia, who is mourning her own brother and has sworn off men for seven years. Orsino sends Cesario to woo Olivia on his behalf, but Olivia falls in love with the messenger, Cesario, who is actually Viola. Meanwhile, Viola herself has fallen in love with Orsino, creating a tangled love triangle that only the return of Sebastian can unravel.

The play's subplot involves the household of Olivia, where her puritanical steward Malvolio is tricked by her uncle Sir Toby Belch, his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Olivia's witty maid Maria into believing that Olivia loves him. They forge a letter that leads Malvolio to behave in absurdly arrogant ways, and he is eventually locked up as a madman. The play culminates in a series of revelations and reunions: Sebastian and Viola are reunited, the mistaken identities are resolved, and the lovers are paired off—Orsino with Viola, Olivia with Sebastian, and Sir Toby with Maria. Only Malvolio is left humiliated and vowing revenge, a bitter note in an otherwise joyful comedy.

Twelfth Night matters because it explores the fluidity of gender and identity, the irrationality of love, and the social chaos that ensues when normal rules are suspended. Its title refers to the Twelfth Night of Christmas, a time of revelry and role-reversal, and the play captures that spirit of festive misrule. It remains one of Shakespeare's most performed and studied comedies, celebrated for its witty dialogue, memorable characters, and its profound yet playful meditation on the nature of desire and self-deception.

Key Takeaways

- Love is often based on illusion and self-deception, as seen when Olivia falls for Cesario's disguise and Orsino loves the idea of love more than the real Olivia.
- Disguise and mistaken identity can reveal deeper truths about gender and desire, challenging rigid social roles.
- The pursuit of self-knowledge is central: characters like Viola and Orsino come to understand their own hearts through the chaos of the plot.

- Foolishness and festivity are celebrated, but cruelty, like the gulling of Malvolio, can leave a bitter aftertaste.
- Social ambition and pride can make one vulnerable to manipulation, as Malvolio's vanity leads to his humiliation.
- The play suggests that true love requires seeing beyond appearances and accepting the beloved as they are, not as a projection.
- Reconciliation and forgiveness are possible, but not everyone is included in the happy ending, as Malvolio's exit shows.
- The title 'Twelfth Night' signals a world of temporary inversion where servants can outwit masters and chaos can lead to harmony.

Chapter Summaries

Act 1

The play opens with Duke Orsino pining for Olivia, who refuses his advances. A shipwreck brings Viola to Illyria; she disguises herself as Cesario and enters Orsino's service. Orsino sends Cesario to woo Olivia, but Olivia falls for Cesario instead. Meanwhile, Olivia's uncle Sir Toby and his friend Sir Andrew are carousing, and Olivia's steward Malvolio scolds them. Viola, as Cesario, delivers Orsino's message to Olivia, who becomes smitten with the messenger.

Act 2

Viola, as Cesario, realizes Olivia has fallen for her disguise. Sebastian, Viola's twin, arrives in Illyria with his friend Antonio, who saved him from the shipwreck. Sir Toby and Maria plot to trick Malvolio by planting a forged letter from Olivia. Malvolio finds the letter and believes Olivia loves him, resolving to act strangely. Viola and Orsino have a conversation about love, where Viola hints at her own feelings. Antonio gives Sebastian his purse and they part, with Antonio planning to follow.

Act 3

Olivia confesses her love to Cesario (Viola), who rejects her. Sir Andrew, jealous of Cesario, challenges him to a duel. Antonio, mistaking Cesario for Sebastian, intervenes and is arrested. He asks Cesario for his purse, but Viola denies knowing him, leaving Antonio bewildered. Sebastian, meanwhile, is mistaken for Cesario by Olivia, who invites him into her house. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew prepare for the duel, but confusion reigns as Sebastian appears.

Act 4

Sebastian is accosted by Sir Andrew, who thinks he is Cesario, and fights back. Olivia stops the fight and takes Sebastian to her house, believing he is Cesario. She proposes marriage, and Sebastian, amazed by her beauty and wealth, agrees. Meanwhile, Malvolio, following the forged

letter, appears in yellow stockings and cross-gartered, smiling and speaking nonsense, and is deemed mad. He is locked in a dark room, where Feste, the fool, torments him disguised as a priest.

Act 5

Orsino and Cesario (Viola) arrive at Olivia's house. Olivia greets Cesario as her husband, and Orsino is furious. Antonio is brought in, and he identifies Cesario as Sebastian. Then Sebastian appears, and the twins are reunited. The truth of Viola's disguise is revealed. Orsino, realizing he loves Viola, proposes to her. Olivia is married to Sebastian. Sir Toby marries Maria. Malvolio is released and vows revenge, but the play ends with Feste's song about the wind and the rain.

Themes

- Love and illusion
- Gender and identity
- Festive misrule
- Social ambition and pride
- Cruelty and forgiveness
- The nature of folly

Notable Quotes

- "If music be the food of love, play on;" — Orsino's opening speech, expressing his obsessive love and desire for music to soothe his passion.
- "Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." — The forged letter that Malvolio reads, which convinces him that Olivia loves him.
- "O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful in the contempt and anger of his lip!" — Olivia's aside after Cesario (Viola) rejects her, showing her fascination with his disdain.
- "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" — Sir Toby's retort to Malvolio's puritanical scolding, defending festivity and pleasure.
- "I am all the daughters of my father's house, and all the brothers too." — Viola's line to Orsino, hinting at her dual identity as both woman and man.
- "Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." — Feste's comment after Malvolio's humiliation, suggesting that time will bring retribution.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Twelfth Night about?

Twelfth Night is a comedy about mistaken identity, love, and festive chaos. After a shipwreck, Viola disguises herself as a man named Cesario and serves Duke Orsino, who sends her to woo Countess Olivia. Olivia falls for Cesario, while Viola loves Orsino. Meanwhile, Olivia's steward Malvolio is tricked into believing she loves him. The arrival of Viola's twin Sebastian resolves the confusion, leading to multiple marriages.

Is Twelfth Night worth reading?

Yes, Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, offering witty dialogue, memorable characters, and a playful exploration of love, gender, and identity. Its themes remain relevant, and its humor and emotional depth make it a rewarding read for both newcomers and seasoned Shakespeare fans. The play's blend of romance and comedy ensures it is both entertaining and thought-provoking.

How does Twelfth Night end?

Spoiler: The twins Viola and Sebastian are reunited, resolving the mistaken identity. Orsino, realizing he loves Viola, proposes to her. Olivia is already married to Sebastian. Sir Toby marries Maria. Malvolio, released from his confinement, vows revenge but is dismissed. The play ends with Feste's song about the wind and the rain, leaving a bittersweet note amid the general joy.

Who should read Twelfth Night?

Twelfth Night is ideal for readers who enjoy Shakespeare's comedies, romantic plots with mistaken identity, and sharp social satire. It appeals to students, theater lovers, and anyone interested in themes of gender fluidity and the absurdity of love. Its accessible humor and relatively short length make it a good starting point for those new to Shakespeare.

How long does it take to read Twelfth Night?

Twelfth Night is a short play, typically around 2,500 lines. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes about 1.5 to 2 hours to read the full text. Many editions include footnotes and introductions, which may add extra time. It can easily be read in one sitting.