Main Ideas

Themes

## Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

### Love as a Cause of Suffering

*Twelfth Night* is a romantic comedy, and romantic love is the play’s main focus. Despite the fact that the play offers a happy ending, in which the various lovers find one another and achieve wedded bliss, Shakespeare shows that love can cause pain. Many of the characters seem to view love as a kind of curse, a feeling that attacks its victims suddenly and disruptively. Various characters claim to suffer painfully from being in love, or, rather, from the pangs of unrequited love. At one point, Orsino depicts love dolefully as an “appetite” that he wants to satisfy and cannot (I.i.1–3); at another point, he calls his desires “fell and cruel hounds” (I.i.21). Olivia more bluntly describes love as a “plague” from which she suffers terribly (I.v.265). These metaphors contain an element of violence, further painting the love-struck as victims of some random force in the universe. Even the less melodramatic Viola sighs unhappily that “My state is desperate for my master’s love” (II.ii.35). This desperation has the potential to result in violence—as in Act V, scene i, when Orsino threatens to kill Cesario because he thinks that -Cesario has forsaken him to become Olivia’s lover.

Love is also exclusionary: some people achieve romantic happiness, while others do not. At the end of the play, as the happy lovers rejoice, both Malvolio and Antonio are prevented from having the objects of their desire. Malvolio, who has pursued Olivia, must ultimately face the realization that he is a fool, socially unworthy of his noble mistress. Antonio is in a more difficult situation, as social norms do not allow for the gratification of his apparently sexual attraction to Sebastian. Love, thus, cannot conquer all obstacles, and those whose desires go unfulfilled remain no less in love but feel the sting of its absence all the more severely.

### The Uncertainty of Gender

Gender is one of the most obvious and much-discussed topics in the play. *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare’s so-called transvestite comedies, in which a female character—in this case, Viola—disguises herself as a man. This situation creates a sexual mess: Viola falls in love with Orsino but cannot tell him, because he thinks she is a man, while Olivia, the object of Orsino’s affection, falls for Viola in her guise as Cesario. There is a clear homoerotic subtext here: Olivia is in love with a woman, even if she thinks he is a man, and Orsino often remarks on Cesario’s beauty, suggesting that he is attracted to Viola even before her male disguise is removed. This latent homoeroticism finds an explicit echo in the minor character of Antonio, who is clearly in love with his male friend, Sebastian. But Antonio’s desires cannot be satisfied, while Orsino and Olivia both find tidy heterosexual gratification once the sexual ambiguities and deceptions are straightened out.

Yet, even at the play’s close, Shakespeare leaves things somewhat murky, especially in the Orsino-Viola relationship. Orsino’s declaration of love to Viola suggests that he enjoys prolonging the pretense of Viola’s masculinity. Even after he knows that Viola is a woman, Orsino says to her, “Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never should’st love woman like to me” (V.i.260–261). Similarly, in his last lines, Orsino declares, “Cesario, come— / For so you shall be while you are a man; / But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen” (V.i.372–375). Even once everything is revealed, Orsino continues to address Viola by her male name. We can thus only wonder whether Orsino is truly in love with Viola, or if he is more enamoured of her male persona.

### The Folly of Ambition

The problem of social ambition works itself out largely through the character of Malvolio, the steward, who seems to be a competent servant, if prudish and dour, but proves to be, in fact, a supreme egotist, with tremendous ambitions to rise out of his social class. Maria plays on these ambitions when she forges a letter from Olivia that makes Malvolio believe that Olivia is in love with him and wishes to marry him. Sir Toby and the others find this fantasy hysterically funny, of course—not only because of Malvolio’s unattractive personality but also because Malvolio is not of noble blood. In the class system of Shakespeare’s time, a noblewoman would generally not sully her reputation by marrying a man of lower social status.

Yet the atmosphere of the play may render Malvolio’s aspirations less unreasonable than they initially seem. The feast of Twelfth Night, from which the play takes its name, was a time when social hierarchies were turned upside down. That same spirit is alive in Illyria: indeed, Malvolio’s antagonist, Maria, is able to increase her social standing by marrying Sir Toby. But it seems that Maria’s success may be due to her willingness to accept and promote the anarchy that Sir Toby and the others embrace. This Twelfth Night spirit, then, seems to pass by Malvolio, who doesn’t wholeheartedly embrace the upending of order and decorum but rather wants to blur class lines for himself alone.

Motifs

## Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

### Letters, Messages, and Tokens

*Twelfth Night* features a great variety of messages sent from one character to another—sometimes as letters and other times in the form of tokens. Such messages are used both for purposes of communication and miscommunication—sometimes deliberate and sometimes accidental. Maria’s letter to Malvolio, which purports to be from Olivia, is a deliberate (and successful) attempt to trick the steward. Sir Andrew’s letter demanding a duel with Cesario, meanwhile, is meant seriously, but because it is so appallingly stupid, Sir Toby does not deliver it, rendering it extraneous. Malvolio’s missive, sent by way of Feste from the dark room in which he is imprisoned, ultimately works to undo the confusion caused by Maria’s forged letter and to free Malvolio from his imprisonment.

But letters are not the only kind of messages that characters employ to communicate with one another. Individuals can be employed in the place of written communication—Orsino repeatedly sends Cesario, for instance, to deliver messages to Olivia. Objects can function as messages between people as well: Olivia sends Malvolio after Cesario with a ring, to tell the page that she loves him, and follows the ring up with further gifts, which symbolize her romantic attachment. Messages can convey important information, but they also create the potential for miscommunication and confusion—especially with characters like Maria and Sir Toby manipulating the information.

### Madness

No one is truly insane in *Twelfth Night,* yet a number of characters are accused of being mad, and a current of insanity or zaniness runs through the action of the play. After Sir Toby and Maria dupe Malvolio into believing that Olivia loves him, Malvolio behaves so bizarrely that he is assumed to be mad and is locked away in a dark room. Malvolio himself knows that he is sane, and he accuses everyone around him of being mad. Meanwhile, when Antonio encounters Viola (disguised as Cesario), he mistakes her for Sebastian, and his angry insistence that she recognize him leads people to assume that *he* is mad. All of these incidents feed into the general atmosphere of the play, in which normal life is thrown topsy-turvy, and everyone must confront a reality that is somehow fractured.

### Disguises

Many characters in *Twelfth Night* assume disguises, beginning with Viola, who puts on male attire and makes everyone else believe that she is a man. By dressing his protagonist in male garments, Shakespeare creates endless sexual confusion with the Olivia-Viola--Orsino love triangle. Other characters in disguise include Malvolio, who puts on crossed garters and yellow stockings in the hope of winning Olivia, and Feste, who dresses up as a priest—Sir Topas—when he speaks to Malvolio after the steward has been locked in a dark room. Feste puts on the disguise even though Malvolio will not be able to see him, since the room is so dark, suggesting that the importance of clothing is not just in the eye of the beholder. For Feste, the disguise completes his assumption of a new identity—in order to be Sir Topas, he must look like Sir Topas. Viola puts on new clothes and changes her gender, while Feste and Malvolio put on new garments either to impersonate a nobleman (Feste) or in the hopes of becoming a nobleman (Malvolio). Through these disguises, the play raises questions about what makes us who we are, compelling the audience to wonder if things like gender and class are set in stone, or if they can be altered with a change of clothing.

### Mistaken Identity

The instances of mistaken identity are related to the prevalence of disguises in the play, as Viola’s male clothing leads to her being mistaken for her brother, Sebastian, and vice versa. Sebastian is mistaken for Viola (or rather, Cesario) by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, and then by Olivia, who promptly marries him. Meanwhile, Antonio mistakes Viola for Sebastian, and thinks that his friend has betrayed him when Viola claims to not know him. These cases of mistaken identity, common in Shakespeare’s comedies, create the tangled situation that can be resolved only when Viola and Sebastian appear together, helping everyone to understand what has happened.

Foreshadowing

*Twelfth Night* does not use foreshadowing in the conventional sense. Important events are not overtly foretold in the early parts of the play. Rather, Shakespeare uses wordplay and imagery in order to punctuate or amplify later scenes, allowing them to reverberate in retrospect. Similar devices are used to prepare the audience for the advent of certain characters or the use of plot devices. Here are examples of themes and plot points foreshadowed in *Twelfth Night*.

### The role of love, the use of disguises.

Perhaps the most important force at work in *Twelfth Night* is erotic desire and the many forms it assumes. This theme is often expressed literally through the outward disguises of characters. Shakespeare immediately introduces the mechanics of this theme with the first lines spoken by Duke Orsino in Act I, scene i: “Oh spirit of love! How quick and fresh art thou, /…So full of shapes is fancy, / that it alone is high fantastical.” (I.i.). This quote introduces the outsized role of love in the play. The mention of ‘fancy,’ which here means love, as full of shapes sets up the prospect of love and Eros assuming unrecognizable forms. The soliloquy prepares the audience for the entrance of Viola, whose disguise as Cesario introduces an unexpected love triangle. Orsino’s soliloquy portrays love as one of the primary movers of the play. We understand that some characters will function less as autonomous, free-willed agents and more as participants, buffeted by a power outside of their control. Sure enough, Orsino and Olivia shift easily from one love to another, and Malvolio falls for Olivia quite suddenly.

### Patient love vs. fickle love

The main characters’ drastic swings in affection are also foreshadowed throughout the first acts. In Act II scene iv, Orsino first declares that men are fickle and unreliable: “Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm, / More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn, than women’s are.” Later in the same scene contradicts himself, saying the love of women is less intense than men’s because their hearts “lack retention.” As Feste observes, Orsino himself is “a very Opal,” changing constantly. Later we will see Orsino easily transfer his love for Olivia to Viola. The scene foreshadows the two kinds of desire present in *Twelfth Night:* a constant, “patient” love (much like Viola’s) and a fickle one that darts about from place to place, like Orsino’s. Orsino’s conflicting observations about desire across genders foregrounds the play’s finale (where Orsino quickly forsakes his love for Olivia in order to marry Viola), making the sudden switch all the more poignant, biting, and comical.

### Arrival of Sebastian, mistaken identities, and the reunification of the twins.

Another important motif that enhances conflict in the play is mistaken identity. After Sebastian arrives in Illyria, he and his twin sister Viola (disguised as Cesario) are often mistaken for one another, creating many complications and tricky scenarios. This mechanism is craftily set up in the early sections of the play. When Viola is first introduced in Act I, scene ii, the Captain shares his belief that Sebastian might still be alive, because he saw him swimming away, “holding acquaintance with the waves.” This note of doubt regarding Sebastian’s death foreshadows his later arrival. Sure enough, once Sebastian appears in Act II, scene i, he too fears that his sister has drowned. Since the audience now knows that both Viola and Sebastian are alive and well, and since both are presently on the Illyrian mainland, chances are the two will reunite later in the story. Their reunion functions as the climax of the play, and triggers the resolution. Once Sebastian admits that Viola “much resembles” him (II.ii.), the audience is prepared for the antics that result from mistaken identities.

Quotations

Desire and Love

*If music be the food of love, play on.   
Give me excess of it; that surfeiting,   
That appetite may sicken and die (I.i.)*

Duke Orsino’s soliloquy forms the first lines spoken in the play. The speech introduces the importance that love will play in the plot. Orsino, as we soon learn, is in love with Lady Olivia. But Lady Olivia is not moved by the Duke’s advances, leaving Orsino in a rather uncomfortable position. He is burdened by lovesickness and wants relief. If music is the nourishment of love, he thinks, then perhaps by glutting himself on music, he can also become sick of love and so his desires might conveniently go away. In a sense, he’s eager to move on with his life. This soliloquy establishes one of the central themes of *Twelfth Night*: love as a powerful force with a will of its own.

*What is love? ’Tis not hereafter;   
Present mirth hath present laughter;   
What’s to come is still unsure;   
In delay there lies no plenty (II.iii.)*

These lines are sung by Feste in Olivia’s house at the bequest of Sir Toby. The song emphasizes the limited shelf life of romantic love. Love is something that ought to be seized quickly. The song also strongly reflects the recent developments in Olivia’s storyline. After resolving to mourn her brother for seven years without showing her face in public, she has suddenly fallen head over heels for Ceasrio, aka Viola. Now Olivia seems to appreciate that “in delay there lies no plenty.” In order to follow her heart, she must seize the moment.

*We men may say more, swear more, but indeed   
Our shows are more than will, for still we prove   
Much in our vows, but little in our love. (II.iv.)*

Here Viola, disguised as Cesario, discusses with Orsino the different ways in which men and women love. After Orsino suggests that women cannot love as intensely as men do because their hearts cannot retain as much passion, Cesario tells him the story of a fictional, lovelorn sister in order to demonstrate how misguided Orsino’s prejudice is. At the end, Cesario suggests that even though men may express their love more emphatically than women, men will not necessarily be faithful to their partner or consistent in their affection. And indeed, Orsino’s sudden decision to marry Viola near the end of the play seems to support this observation.

Madness

*My masters are you mad? Or what are you? Have you   
no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like   
tinkers at this time of night? (II.iii.)*

Here, Malvolio admonishes Sir Toby and Sir Andrew for their drunken rowdiness. He even goes so far as to suggest that their roguish behavior and blatant disregard for others is a sign of madness. Malvolio’s attitude becomes significant as later in the play, Sir Toby enacts his revenge on Malvolio by making him appear mad in Olivia’s company, essentially forcing on Malvolio some of his own medicine, albeit in a much larger dose. Madness has a more liberal sense here, and seems to include anything that falls outside the bounds of civil order.

*Sir Topas, never was a man thus wronged. Good Sir   
Topas, do not think I am mad. They have laid me here   
in hideous darkness. (IV.ii.)*

These lines are spoken by Malvolio once he has been imprisoned as a madman. In order to exploit the joke even further, Sir Toby pressures Feste to dress up as a priest and perform a mock-exorcism on Malvolio. The reference to darkness here is significant as it not only refers to the physical darkness of the prison itself but is also a figurative allusion to madness as a state of confusion. Indeed, Malvolio is not the one who is mad (as he rightly points out) but those around him; everything has been turned upside down. Civility has been pushed aside so that other characters in *Twelfth Night* can freely indulge in silly antics and ribaldry.

*I am as mad as he,   
If sad and merry madness equal be. (III.iv.)*

In these lines Olivia suggests that she is as mad as Malvolio, who has been acting quite strangely after reading Maria’s letter. However, Olivia makes a distinction here. Her “madness” functions as an expression of her love for Cesario, which remains unreturned and has plunged her into a state of deep melancholy. Hers is a gloomy madness, essentially stemming from a state of lovesickness, while Malvolio’s is a merry kind, and originates instead from an over-inflated optimism, as he is convinced that Lady Olivia really loves him. This line is important as it links the theme of madness to lovesickness and melancholy, and suggests that romantic desire has the power to inhibit rational decision making. In this way, the many raucous antics of *Twelfth Night* speak to the enormous influence of love and erotic desire in this play.

Disguise/Deception

*Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness,   
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much (II.ii.)*

Here, Viola first becomes aware of Olivia’s newfound affection for Cesario and laments the unintended consequences of her disguise. In this scene, Viola decides that the use of deception is a convenient vehicle for evil influences. She also suggests that women in general are more susceptible to deceptions. This quote is significant as it marks the first time a character openly rebukes disguise and deception as a malevolent force, capable of misleading and causing inadvertent damage.

*Well, I’ll put it on and I will dissemble myself in’t;   
and I would I were the first that ever dissembled in such a gown (IV.ii.)*

Here, Feste is asked by Sir Toby to dress up as a priest in order to fool Malvolio, now imprisoned as a madman. Feste’s disguise as priest is integral to a mock-exorcism that Sir Toby wishes to orchestrate. Once again, Feste makes a rather incisive observation, pointing to other priests who don the gowns of the office but are only pretending or “dissembling” to play the part. Shakespeare uses this pun to satirize the church, wherein unscrupulous and deceptive priests can uphold their authority by merely wearing the proper garments.

*…Cesario, come,   
For so you shall be, while you are a man,   
But when in other habits you are seen,   
Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen. (V.i.)*

By this point, Viola has revealed her true identity and Duke Orsino has agreed to marry her. He claims that once Viola has shed her disguise, she will be the queen of his love. However, this line is significant because Orsino insists on addressing Viola as her male alias even though he no longer has to. Some scholars point to this line as evidence that Orsino is enamored more by the disguise than by Viola herself.

Gender and Sexuality

*Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,   
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,   
Than women’s are. (II.iv.)*

Here, Orsino is speaking to Viola, disguised as Cesario, about the particular ways in which men love. When he asks Cesario what kind of woman he fancies, Cesario says he wantssomeone of his complexion and age, but Orsino insists that that is too old. A man should marry a woman younger than himself, so that his affection will remain constant over time. This quote introduces an interesting discussion about the way sexuality and desire differs across the sexes: in order to sustain male desire over time, Orsino believes the object of desire should preserve the outward semblance of youthfulness and beauty. Otherwise, a man’s interest is likely to waver or wander elsewhere. Men, he implies, are more shallow and fickle than women are. Although his statement ultimately proves true for Orsino, who quickly switches from Olivia to Viola, the advice could also apply to Olivia, who is equally fickle in switching from Cesario to Sebastian.

*…Diana’s lip is not more rubious. Thy small pipe   
Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,   
And all is semblative a woman’s part. (I.iv.)*

Here, Viola, disguised as Cesario, is about to set off on her quest to woo Olivia on the Duke’s behalf. Orsino seems to think that he will be perfect for the job. Unabashedly, he lavishes high praise on Cesario’s physical attributes, which are naturally quite feminine. Of course, at this point, Orsino has no reason to believe that Cesario may not be a man. Scholars often point to these lines (as well as Orsino’s last line in Act V) as evidence of homoeroticism, introducing the possibility that the Duke may actually be more attracted to “Cesario” than Viola. These lines are significant as they introduce a certain level of ambiguity regarding Orsino’s sexuality.

*But come what may, I do adore thee so   
That danger shall seem sport, and I will go. (II.i.)*

In this quote, Antonio reveals his willingness to risk danger on Sebastian’s behalf. At this point in the play, Sebastian and Antonio have washed ashore in Illyria. Antonio confesses to Sebastian that some of his previous activity on the sea has made him an enemy of Duke Orsino. Therefore, his wandering further into the city introduces the risk that he will be captured. However, Antonio’s strong feelings for Sebastian compels him to keep going.