

## English Literature Unit 3: *Twelfth Night* (Cambridge edition\*)

### Skills targeted:

**AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

**AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

**AO3** Make comparisons and explain links between texts, evaluating writers' different ways of expressing meaning and achieving effects.

**AO4** Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self and other readers in different contexts and at different times.

**N.B.** Exam students are assessed on AOs 1, 2 and 4: Controlled Assessment students on AOs 1–4. In the examination, students will be given an extract and asked to explore an aspect of it. They will then be required to explore the same aspect in a different part of the play of their own choosing. The Controlled Assessment requires the submission of up to 2000 words in response to a task set on a play by Shakespeare and a linked text (see suggestions below). AQA provides a bank of tasks to choose from, and these change every year. Students will be expected to cover all the Assessment Objectives in their submission, but comparison of the linked texts is not a requirement.

### Why study this text?

This powerful play deals with the hugely relevant themes of gender identity and the importance of family and love as integral components of what makes us human. Written and performed as a comedy, the play offers many opportunities for discussion on the appropriateness of humour when focussed on the perceived weaknesses of others through bullying – there are dark and harsh undertones beneath the humorous exterior. If you are teaching for Controlled Assessment there are a whole host of links between this text and the others in the English Literary Heritage (please see **Linking Shakespeare with the English Literary Heritage**, below).

*Twelfth Night* offers something for a wide range of students' responses due to its treatment of sexual politics and the nature of love. The intellectual musings of Feste masquerading as pure humour can be contrasted with the more slapstick revelry of Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, while the sheer unadulterated arrogance of Malvolio will unite students in wishing him ill. Pity and sadness at his crushed later state may force students to think again – or not! The Viola/Cesario love match with Olivia will create debate, while the role of Orsino as the lovesick lord will intrigue and raise questions about his sincerity and obsession.

### Background and context

*Twelfth Night* is so called as this was the period of time after Christmas (up to 6 January) when ordinary rules and conventions were laid aside and authority could be challenged through humour. Similar to carnival in South America, the twelve days of Christmas were a time of organised masques, revelries and sheer unadulterated humour. This was a time of releasing inhibition and allowing disorder to flourish. In some situations, servants were given the privilege of becoming 'master' for a time with the power; the 'Lord of Misrule' was in charge of organising the boisterousness and fun. However, the whole point of the time was to emphasise the real authority – on 7 January, power returned to its rightful place and the servants knew that things were back to normal. Elizabethan society was strictly hierarchical and everyone knew their place. The play offers some insight into elements of misrule and shows us that the cleverest were not always necessarily in authority.

Students preparing for the exam are not expected to make links with other texts or to know the context of the play, but should rather focus on close reading of the text.

## Discussion points

### Gender identity

How do we judge people by their gender? When Orsino and Olivia view Viola as Cesario, why do they 'see' a young man? What identifies 'her' as a 'he'? Can it really be just clothing and body language? What are our expectations of what men and women do? How advanced was Shakespeare in dealing with the issue? Link this to male actors playing female characters in the Elizabethan theatre and the many elements of humour arising from this and cross-dressing – as in *Twelfth Night*.

### Bullying

How much sympathy do we have for Sir Andrew and Malvolio when they are singled out for personal attack? Do they deserve such humiliation – especially in the case of Malvolio? How far do we create our own monsters when we push people to the limits of their tolerance?

### Love and relationships

What do we learn about 'love' in this play? Can the emotion which physically incapacitates Orsino be the same emotion which closets Olivia in her home and yet persuades her to leave her mourning at the sight of Cesario? Can love change us all – even the hapless Malvolio? What does 'love' mean when it can cause such upset? Can love truly 'conquer all'?

### The power of imagery and verse in the play

The play opens with the famous image of music as 'the food of love' and continues to use poetry and song throughout to relate the sense of the difference between reality and aspiration. The comment of Viola that 'nature with a beauteous wall/Doth oft close in pollution', which refers to mistaken identity, echoes the 'no art to find the mind's construction' of *Macbeth*. Common images recur throughout the play; in addition to music, Shakespeare uses death, love, flowers and disease. Students could be asked to take the use of particular imagery through the play and comment on how it is used for similar/different purposes.

An interesting aspect of the play is the use of verse and prose by characters from different levels of the social hierarchy. Higher status characters would conventionally speak mainly in verse (and vice-versa). However, in *Twelfth Night* this convention is generally ignored and it is the comedy of the scene that tends to the use of prose (e.g. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew) and the serious love scenes that are presented in verse. Students could investigate this and find evidence, leading to a discussion of the change from one to the other – and why.

### The power of song in the play

The songs of Feste (Act 2, Scene 3; Act 2, Scene 4; Act 4, Scene 3; Act 5, Scene 1; the end of the play) frame the moods of the scenes and offer comment on the drama without specific reference to the characters. The songs give strength to the character of Feste that transcends his individual role in the court; through the songs he adopts the voice of the universal commentator and becomes the audience's guide. Students could interrogate the lyrics of the songs and link their ideas to the action of the play – just what is he saying?

## Example task

### Group discussion – advice for an actor

Select any particular scene for an orally assessed discussion. For example, take Act 3, Scene 4, lines 16–50, on pages 89–91 where Malvolio approached Olivia dressed in his cross-gartered yellow stockings, convinced by the fake note that this is what she most desires and finds attractive. In groups of at least four, students should discuss how they would advise an actor to play the part of Malvolio in this scene. Using all the elements of performance ranging from body language to

facial expression, tone of voice and use of pauses, even looking to the audience; explore how the humour and the tragedy of the moment can be simultaneously presented to an audience. This task will fulfil the group discussion as well as role play elements for assessment. Plenary feedback will be strengthened and enriched by students having concluded aspects of presentation differently, offering them the chance to explain and demonstrate. The use of language for explicit effect is emphasised by this activity. Students could also look at different versions in film and performance, and compare how different actors play the roles. Responses to the task will range from the merely descriptive, where pupils will recount a scene with brief advice on basic dramatisation to the more complex and subtle understanding of the possibilities and nuances of different levels of portrayal using a wide range of dramatic devices.

## Analytical approaches/Creative approaches

### Analysis of the power of love

Students will attempt to define what they have learned about ‘love’ from the play by analysing what key characters say about ‘love’ and its effect upon them. The obvious victory of ‘true love’ at the play’s conclusion and the harmony of the settled relationships should not deter students from studying the rocky road of ‘love’. Discussion will range from the **courtly love** of Orsino (with his idealisation of Olivia) and **romantic love** which also idealised ‘love at first sight’, with marriage as the logical conclusion. At the lowest level, pupils will be able to identify the feelings portrayed by characters and make some comment with brief reference. At the highest levels of achievement, pupils will understand the multi-faceted nature of the emotional responses in the play and be able to compare and contrast the different characters’ reactions to the effect of ‘love’ while using careful and relevant reference to the text. There is plenty of evidence of selfishness and self-indulgence in Orsino and denial in Olivia. Malvolio is obsessed with love of his own self-image while Viola’s love for Orsino is constant, unswerving and self-sacrificing. There is certainly plenty of material to support a number of definitions in this play.

### Creating a ‘lost’ scene

Students should be in groups of 3–4. Their task is to create a scene that they believe should have been included in the play and to explain why. This task allows students to focus on what may have been said by characters had they been given the chance – such as an attempt by Viola to reveal her true identity to Olivia (without success). The only rule must be is that the narrative conclusion of play itself would not be affected.

## Linking Shakespeare with the English literary heritage

The key themes of *Twelfth Night* allow Controlled Assessment students to be able to be led to make references to other ELH texts: e.g.:

- ∞ **Links by themes and ideas** – the melancholy self-obsessed love of Orsino can be compared to many examples of love poetry such as that by Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy.
- ∞ **Links by characterisation** – Viola and her secret love can be compared to *Jane Eyre* and other selfless heroines such as Marty South in *The Woodlanders*.
- ∞ **Aspects of genre and form** – students could identify the elements of disguise and comedy from *Twelfth Night* and compare them with other dramas where the dramatic irony of disguise is a key factor – including other plays by Shakespeare – for example, *The Winter’s Tale* or *As You Like It*.

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## Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- ∞ be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- ∞ be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- ∞ be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- ∞ use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
- ∞ use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

## Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!* The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

*Mister Pip*

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Martyn Pig*

*Of Mice and Men*

*An Inspector Calls*

*Lord of the Flies*

\*All page references in this resource are to the Cambridge University Press edition published in 2005; however, no preference is thereby expressed as at the time of writing no editions had been specified as exam board preference.

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