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Specifications that use this resource:

Aspects of comedy: text overview - Twelfth Night

AS and A-level English
Literature B 7716: 7717

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *Twelfth Night* in relation to the genre of Comedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail. This resource is designed to support you in teaching the 'Aspects of comedy' component of A-level English Literature B.



Twelfth Night Act II Scene IV by Walter Deverell (1850)

"Well, God give them wisdom that have it; and those that are fools, let them use their talents"

Overview

Twelfth Night contains many classic aspects of dramatic comedy. Central to its design is a series of tangled love interests (Orsino loves Olivia, Olivia loves Cesario and then Sebastian, Viola loves Orsino, Sir Andrew and Malvolio love Olivia); disguise (the plot hinges on Viola's dressing as a male servant in order to survive after being shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria); mistaken identities (Viola and Sebastian are twins so alike that no-one can tell them apart); trickery and tomfoolery; the lavish use of singing and dancing; the ridiculing of hypocrisy, excess and affectation; the temporary domination of chaos and misrule; and an ending where all confusion is resolved and three marriages take place.

Slapstick and physical comedy

Perhaps the most obvious form of comedy in *Twelfth Night* is the slapstick humour generated by Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek (whose names are themselves a source of humour) and their cronies. The humour is immediately signalled by their use of prose, bawdy language and song that would no doubt have appealed to the working class audience in the pit. Their buffoonery during their midnight revel in Act 2 scene iii, where they drunkenly carouse, mock Malvolio and sing at the top of their voices, reflects their sense of fun and joie de vivre. Likewise, the physical comedy in the scene where Sir Andrew and Cesario attempt to duel, but prove themselves utterly inept and fearful, is clearly entertaining and invites laughter.

Malvolio's downfall and schadenfreude

If there is a comic villain in *Twelfth Night* it is, at least initially, Malvolio, whose puritanical stance and attempts to destroy the revelry of Sir Toby's party place him at odds with the lovable rogues and the joyous spirit of the play. Moreover, his hubristic attitude, evident in both the ways he reprimands his superiors and in his conceited belief that he could be his mistress' master, means that the audience, much like the onlookers in the Box-tree scene, enjoy his downfall. His appearance in 'yellow and cross-gartered' stockings, so different from his usual funereal garb, is a source of visual comedy. Similarly his suggestive comments as he fantasises about Olivia – 'To bed! Ay, sweetheart, and I'll come to thee!' – are amusing because of Shakespeare's deployment of incongruity. Whilst the way he is thrown into "a dark room" and then taunted by Feste may seem cruel to a modern audience, there is a sense of schadenfreude in witnessing the downfall of the pompous fellow who has overstepped the bounds of his social position and attempted to destroy the festive spirit of the play's world. It is also important to remember that humiliation is often at the heart of comedy and that comedy is born of cruelty.

The role of fools – Feste and Sir Andrew

A predominant figure of comedy is the fool. In the world of *Twelfth Night*, Feste is a licensed and professional fool. He contributes to the festive spirit, implied by his name, through his creation of music, song and jokes. He is attached to Olivia's household though he is something of a free spirit often frequenting the Duke's palace and singing to him. Feste embodies the spirit of misrule in which the play delights and he is the perpetrator of folly – the antithesis of the serious Malvolio who, as a Puritan, scorns merrymaking. However, it is not merely his witty word-play that generates comedy. He also exposes truth to the other characters and the audience: he mocks Orsino's lovelorn behaviour; he challenges Olivia's obsessive mourning and, much to Malvolio's horror, proves her a 'fool' in his witty repartee; and he lays bare Malvolio's hubris by publically humiliating him. He thus seems able to see the true nature of those around him, mocking their foibles and flaws, leading to the comic resolution of events. There is also humour in the fact that his role gives him licence to mock his superiors. Despite his status as jester, he is far wiser than his masters ('wise enough' as Viola says 'to play the fool').

The truly foolish character in the play is Andrew Aguecheek, whom Shakespeare creates to play the 'gull'. Andrew is frequently depicted as cowardly, incompetent and unintelligent. He is unable to understand the simplest of jokes or metaphors, responding to Sir Toby's 'I smell a device' with the literal 'I have't in my nose, too'. Maria aptly describes him as 'a fool', 'a great quarreller', and one who has the 'gift of a coward'. He is ludicrously led to believe that he could be a potential suitor for Olivia. In this he proves hopeless, as is evident when he attempts to listen in to Cesario to learn how to woo and thus becomes a parody of the courtly lover. Andrew Aguecheek is a figure of fun central to Sir Toby's revelries and a character whose denigration is amusing for both stage and theatre audiences.

Wit and Wordplay

This is a play rich in punning, irony, wordplay and jokes. Language as a source of humour is especially evident in the bawdy dialogue between Maria, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby and in Feste's verbal out manoeuvring of Olivia and Viola. Words are often shown to be slippery and false and communications are frequently misinterpreted, epitomised in Malvolio's misreading of the letter. Just as appearances cannot be trusted, neither can language. Often the audience is alive to the true meaning of innuendoes and equivocating comments when the characters are not. One example is when Viola (as Cesario) informs Orsino 'I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too', thus subtly hinting at her true gender, which Orsino fails to realise.

The Twelfth Night Festivities – a Topsy-Turvy world

Twelfth Night, the eve of the Epiphany, was, in Shakespeare's time, a traditional festival, a time of misrule when social roles were relaxed, when masters waited on their servants, when men were allowed to dress as women, and women as men. The Christmas revels were often led by a chosen Lord of Misrule.

Twelfth Night reflects these traditions. There is an evident festive mood with boisterous revelry; Sir Toby has dominance over Olivia's household and the austere Malvolio is overthrown. Even the exotic setting of Illyria (a name that perhaps recalls the mythical Elysian Fields) seems to set up a fantasy world where normal rules do not apply, establishing a sense of liberality. Moreover, the fact that gender roles are inverted from the moment Viola assumes the guise of Cesario immediately creates a sense of confusion, which is sustained throughout the drama. Cesario openly confesses 'I am not what I am'; but in this play, it seems, neither is anyone else. This is a play where disguise creates significant perplexity: Viola finds herself loved by a woman while she loves a man who assumes she is a boy, making both relationships apparently impossible. It is a world where identities are constantly muddled so Viola and Sebastian are repeatedly mistaken for one another. It is also a world where the conventional social hierarchies are disrupted, given that neither Orsino nor Olivia (due to her state of mourning) appears capable of ruling their households as they should. As a result, for much of the play, the lords of misrule hold sway, revelling long past the midnight hour, meddling in affairs, manipulating those around them and so creating a jovial state of anarchy to which their masters, consumed by their own woes, seem oblivious. However, the audience is always aware of the truth (we know that Sir Andrew is being used by Sir Toby, that Cesario is a woman, that Malvolio is being fooled). Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony thus encourages feelings of superiority which enhance the comedy.

Mocking courtly love and desire

From his opening lines, Orsino's indulgence in his supposed passion for Olivia makes him an obvious source of humour. He is only mildly elevated above the other incompetent suitor, Andrew Aguecheek, and can be read and played as equally ridiculous: he languishes in his own supposed adoration of Olivia, employing hyperbolic language to describe a woman that, given her state of mourning, in the constructed world of the play, he cannot have seen, let alone spoken to, for many months. Moreover, the manner in which he forces another to undertake his wooing for him suggests his emotions are disingenuous – he is in love with the idea of being in love and with playing the role of courtly suitor. Orsino requires music to feed his sickness and is not really in love with Olivia at all. Her very inaccessibility seems to be what makes her appealing as it enables him to indulge his misery and luxuriate in his role as unrequited lover. Moreover, his fickleness, evident in his opening speech when he moves between demanding music in 'excess' and then suddenly commanding 'Enough! No more!' suggests a changeability that anticipates the speed with which he is prepared to shift his affections from Olivia to Viola at the end of the play. Orsino thus represents many of the notions associated with courtly love but in his fickle, melodramatic character they are parodied.

Furthermore, what Shakespeare appears to be suggesting is that love is not something that can be constructed or created as Orsino attempts to do, but is rather an instinctive natural emotion. However, initially, even this natural emotion, is meat for comedy: Viola's adoration of Orsino, which cannot be fulfilled owing to her disguise, and her attempts to get Orsino to speak words of love so that she can imagine herself in the role of lover, are funny. Likewise, there is humour in Viola's accidental success in winning Olivia's heart, not for her master but herself, through her genuine declarations of affection in her 'Make me a willow cabin' speech, which ironically is not actually directed at Olivia but at the absent Orsino.

What is more, love is seen as capable of making a fool of even the most straight-laced of individuals. Malvolio's belief that Olivia loves him, and his lustful desire for her (evident when he imagines himself rising 'from a day bed where' he has 'left Olivia sleeping') lead him to behave absurdly. When Sir Toby and Maria trick him into believing Olivia loves him, he vows to 'do everything' that she requires of him, despite the debasing and ludicrous nature of her (apparent) requests. Similarly, Olivia, who appears at first restrained and intelligent, behaves impulsively when she marries Sebastian without even knowing him and then begs Cesario to acknowledge their union, degrading herself in public in the process. The laughable and demeaning manner in which the courtly individuals act when in love enables the audience to smile at their idiocy and gullibility. Importantly, though their foolishness can be forgiven in the world of comedy, not least of all because it is a reminder that love can render all human beings ridiculous.

Comic Resolution

The conclusion of the play consolidates its comic nature. There is the promise of marriage between Orsino and Viola as well as a re-confirmation of the marriage between Olivia and Sebastian. Even Sir Toby and Maria are united, her just reward for her loyalty to him. This series of marriages creates a sense of happiness, a jubilant conclusion clinched by the performance of Feste's seemingly jovial final song. Reminiscent of Puck's conclusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Feste moves us from the fantasy play world back to reality. A key feature of comedy is that it draws attention to its own artifice and that is exactly what happens in Feste's song. What is more, families are also reunified: when Orsino refers to her as 'sweet sister', he comes to replace the brother that Olivia has lost and mourned. Likewise, Sebastian and Viola, divided by the shipwreck at the play's outset, are also reunited, creating a happy resolution that is satisfying for the audience. In the final scene, Shakespeare also interweaves elements of visual and aural comedy. Feste attempts to read Malvolio's letter in the voice of a madman, Sir Toby arrives in a drunken state, and Sir Andrew appears with his 'bloody coxcomb', humorously claiming that the quivering Viola is 'the very devil incarnate'.

Although some readers and audiences are unsettled by what they see as dark shadows across the play (the mistreatment of Malvolio, his vow to be revenged on the whole pack of them, the sadness of Antonio and Sir Andrew and the silencing of Viola), many focus on the positives in the play's outcome, when order is restored and the lords of misrule are overthrown. Malvolio, after all, is released from prison and his behaviour is explained when the plot against him is revealed. Olivia acknowledges that he has been 'most notoriously abused' and Orsino insists he must be entreated 'to a peace'. Attention finally is on the match between Viola and Orsino (she is to become 'Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen'). Viola thus assumes her appropriate position within the social hierarchy as opposed to that of a servant. The play thus ends joyfully with Feste's music acting as a traditional symbol of peace and goodwill.