

TWELFTH NIGHT (Introduction)

Twelfth Night (also called “epiphany”) is a Christmas holiday known as the “Feast of Fools,” a celebration during which “normal” rules are suspended and the world is turned upside down. The master of ceremonies of the occasion is sometimes called “The Lord of Misrule.” The subtitle of this play is “What You Will,” suggesting perhaps a world in which we all follow our own wills? Our own wishes? Rather than interpreting the play in terms of how plausible the events are, think of it as a theme and a set of variations on “following one’s will.” Each of the following characters is associated with a kind of will/wish and therefore a kind of folly. They are also “foils” or contrasts for each other, so that we can better see the kind of folly. Major characters are Feste, Malvolio, Olivia, Orsino, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby, and Viola.

This is a world that lacks authorities; it lacks a responsible “older generation”—no fathers, mothers, or sage rulers. So everyone should be “free”—right? But most characters are bound within their masks or “wills” or desires. Most of them fight time and limitations that stem from causes other than “law.” One critic says this play reveals various delusions concerning the nature of love and also the typical ways our own desire or “will” can limit (and perhaps imprison) us. In this sense, what happens to each character represents appropriate “comic justice.”

Reading: As you read the play, try to identify the self-imposed limitation or folly or mask or blindness of each character. (Notice their attitude toward love and how they define love.) Look for **quotes** that indicate self-imposed limitations (conscious or not). Look also for what characters say about other characters (in a comedy, these statements are usually true—the author’s way of emphasizing important points). Look for examples of dramatic irony.

Following these questions is a general sheet on “kinds” of comedy. Here are some additional ways to explore for answers to that general question of what constitutes each character’s “will”:

1. Many of these characters represent trying to make the form (appearance or “going through motions”) substitute for the content (or perhaps they just want to use masks). Consider Orsino’s idea of loving someone, for instance. Compare some of the characters to get a better insight into the different reasons we use masks. Feste’s mask, for instance, is the mask of the entertainer and commentator (spectator) on human folly. Identify characters who hope that the “form” will get them what they want, but the “spirit” that should go with that form isn’t there and thus the desired effect is not achieved.

2. Many of these characters illustrate some distortion or perversion (although that is a stronger word than I would like) of love. Look at what several characters represent and relate them to each other in a constellation.

The “master of ceremonies” of this world might be either Feste or Sir Toby—we can discuss who seems to best fit that role when we finish the play.

One **major question this play explores** might be “Concerning ‘love,’ how do we fool ourselves?” Look for non-obvious ways that you hadn’t thought of before. Much of this “fooling” of ourselves has to do with ideas about our “control.”

Here are subquestions for that main question:

1. “What does each character want? (That character’s “will”)
2. Make your answer to #1 abstract— a kind of thing
3. “What is deluded about that desire (what you got for #2)? Why is it an illusion?”
4. Feste is detached— a “wise fool” who speaks truths about human experience. He is a commentator on the action.
5. How does what each character get at the end represent “comic justice” (a commentary on their “will”)

Reading and Journal Questions: (Only one journal is due-- Tues, Oct. 21)

If there were no “adults” or laws to limit us and we could all follow our own “wills,” would we be happy and fulfilled? Think of each character as showing a kind of desire or limitation or disguise that results from that character’s own “will” (a limitation that might be hard to avoid because the “desire” has an attractive side). Write on any of the following questions **except #1**:

1. Look closely at the Duke’s opening speech on p.1793 (1768 old edition). What is the duke’s point in this quote? (Consider the reasons he gives and how his attitude toward love is quite different from the attitude of a “playboy”-- a guy out for sexual satisfaction only.) Notice that he sets the word “appetite” against the word “love.” What qualities does “appetite” suggest that seem opposed to what we think “love” should mean? What is the problem with the view of love expressed in this speech? (The view of love in this speech accounts for the way he “woos” Olivia.)
2. Look closely at Malvolio’s attitude toward others in the interchange between Olivia and Malvolio (p.1801;1.5.71-83); p. 1776 old ed.). When you have read Act II, relate what others say to (or about) him (pp.1810; 2.3.131-6; pp 1784-6 old ed.) to Olivia’s assessment of Malvolio’s character in Act I. Do his actions validate or contradict what others say about him?
3. Consider what is admirable about Olivia’s mourning but what is also impossible or limiting How does her speech on “schedules” of her beauty (p.1804; 1.5.214-8; p.1779 old ed.) represent what she is trying to do in isolating herself and dedicating herself to grief for her brother? (Hint: Representing her beauty as an “inventory” very different from typical Petrarchan compliments is strange— in some ways admirable, but in others self-deluded.) Do you think Viola’s response true? unfair? both true and unfair?
4. Choose one or two speeches by a character, and show how that speech indicates the self-imposed limitation (folly or limited vision or desire or mask) typical of that character. Rather than just saying something is a folly, say why (and why it is a folly difficult to avoid). Make sure to take into account assessments of that character by other characters. Also, pay attention to how the phrasing (connotations, images, style) helps reveal things about that character. The context of the speech might also be important to its interpretation.

ON COMEDY: "Serious" comedy purports to be "true" but not "realistic." Comedy is difficult to define, as a genre, because there are so many kinds. The "purpose" of comedy may be any combination of the points below. **S** = Shakespearean comedy (this point applies, typically, to Shakespearian comedy).

I. Psychological Aspects ("direct" effects at the "individual" level)

- A. Comedy releases aggression (sometimes through a sense of superiority, according to Hobbes and Freud)
- B. Comedy carries away age and death (celebrates gusto, pleasure, the flesh): the life force conquers all. (Narrowly escaping death often gives us a feeling of new life or rebirth, so such nearness to death is not unusual in comedy of this kind.) (Susanne Langer) **S**

II. Social Aspects ("direct" effects at the group level)

- A. Comedy corrects (called "satiric" comedy) (Bergson)
 - 1. Corrects the aberrant individual (humors, manners)
 - 2. Corrects an overly-rigid or hypocritical or corrupt society. (This form tends to be subversive because it attacks the existing order.)
- B. Comedy provides social "communion"
 - 1. Provides social release through "holiday." (C.L. Barber) **S**
 - 2. Provides a scapegoating ritual that increases the real tolerance of the society (Generosity is frequently the greatest virtue of comedy: self-righteousness does not triumph at the end and often people who have no right to a happy end are included after all.) (Northrop Frye) **S**

III. Mythic Aspects (symbolic presentation/representation of change and relationships)

- A. Comedy helps us conceive of chronological time as "history": there are connections between generations, between events, and between seasons and human life. Plot patterns and character types present to us such connections. (Northrop Frye) **S**
- B. Like other art forms, comedy fosters self-consciousness--it helps us see ourselves through the eyes of others. **S**